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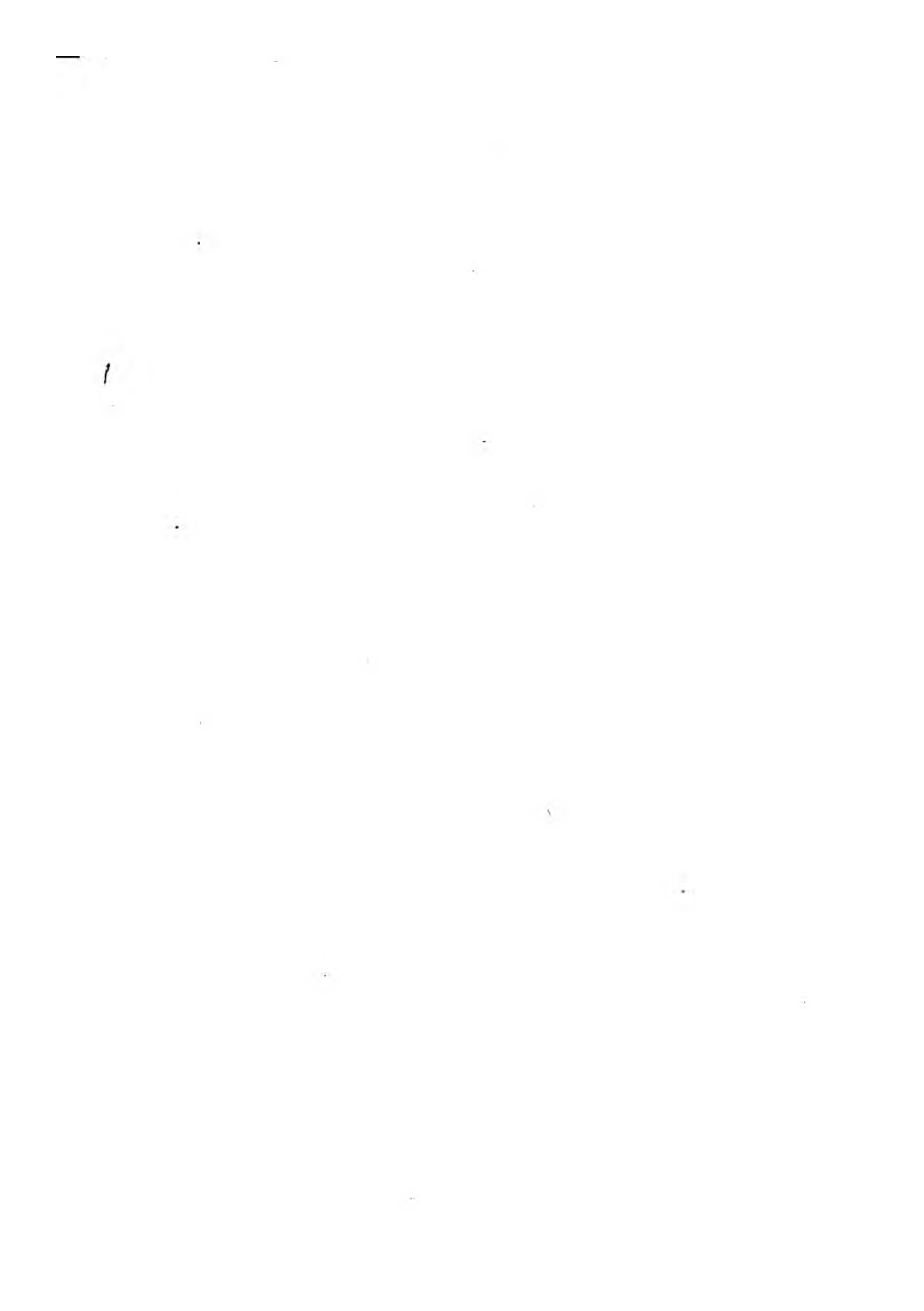


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THE PEACE EGG

AND OTHER TALES.

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AND OTHER TALES

BY

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THE PEACE EGG.



THE PEACE EGG.

A CHRISTMAS TALE.

EVERY one ought to be happy at Christmas. But there are many things which ought to be, and yet are not ; and people are sometimes sad even in the Christmas holidays.

The Captain and his wife were sad, though it was Christmas Eve. Sad, though they were in the prime of life, blessed with good health, devoted to each other and to their children, with competent means, a comfortable house on a little freehold property of their own, and, one might say, everything that heart could desire. Sad, though they were good people, whose peace of mind had a firmer foundation than their earthly goods alone ; contented people, too, with plenty of occupation for mind and body. Sad—and in the nursery this was held to be past all reason—though the children were performing that ancient and most entertaining Play or Christmas Mystery of Good

St. George of England, known as *The Peace Egg*, for their benefit and behoof alone.

The play was none the worse that most of the actors were too young to learn parts, so that there was very little of the rather tedious dialogue, only plenty of dress and ribbons, and of fighting with the wooden swords. But though St. George looked bonny enough to warm any father's heart, as he marched up and down with an air learned by watching many a parade in barrack-square and drill-ground, and though the Valiant Slasher did not cry in spite of falling hard and the Doctor treading accidentally on his little finger in picking him up, still the Captain and his wife sighed nearly as often as they smiled, and the mother dropped tears as well as pennies into the cap which the King of Egypt brought round after the performance.

THE CAPTAIN'S WIFE.

Many many years back the Captain's wife had been a child herself, and had laughed to see the village mummers act the Peace Egg, and had been quite happy on Christmas Eve. Happy, though she had no mother. Happy, though her father was a stern man, very fond of his only child, but with an obstinate

will that not even she dared thwart. She had lived to thwart it, and he had never forgiven her. It was when she married the Captain. The old man had a prejudice against soldiers, which was quite reason enough, in his opinion, for his daughter to sacrifice the happiness of her future life by giving up the soldier she loved. At last he gave her her choice between the Captain and his own favour and money. She chose the Captain, and was disowned and disinherited.

The Captain bore a high character, and was a good and clever officer, but that went for nothing against the old man's whim. He made a very good husband too ; but even this did not move his father-in-law, who had never held any intercourse with him or his wife since the day of their marriage, and who had never seen his own grandchildren. Though not so bitterly prejudiced as the old father, the Captain's wife's friends had their doubts about the marriage. The place was not a military station, and they were quiet country folk who knew very little about soldiers, whilst what they imagined was not altogether favourable to "red-coats" as they called them. Soldiers are well-looking generally, it is true (and the Captain was more than well-looking—he was handsome) ; brave, of course it is their business (and the Captain had V.C. after his name and several bits of ribbon on

his patrol jacket). But then, thought the good people, they are here to-day and gone to-morrow, you "never know where you have them"; they are probably in debt, possibly married to several women in several foreign countries, and, though they are very courteous in society, who knows how they treat their wives when they drag them off from their natural friends and protectors to distant lands where no one can call them to account?

"Ah, poor thing!" said Mrs. John Bull, junior, as she took off her husband's coat on his return from business, a week after the Captain's wedding, "I wonder how she feels? There's no doubt the old man behaved disgracefully; but it's a great risk marrying a soldier. It stands to reason, military men aren't domestic; and I wish—Lucy Jane, fetch your papa's slippers, quick!—she'd had the sense to settle down comfortably amongst her friends with a man who would have taken care of her."

"Officers are a wild set, I expect," said Mr. Bull, complacently, as he stretched his limbs in his own particular arm-chair, into which no member of his family ever intruded. "But the red-coats carry the day with plenty of girls who ought to know better. You women are always caught by a bit of finery. However, there's no use our bothering *our* heads about it. As she has brewed she must bake."

The Captain's wife's baking was lighter and more palatable than her friends believed. The Captain (who took off his own coat when he came home, and never wore slippers but in his dressing-room) was domestic enough. A selfish companion must, doubtless, be a great trial amid the hardships of military life, but when a soldier is kind-hearted, he is often a much more helpful and thoughtful and handy husband than any equally well-meaning civilian. Amid the ups and downs of their wanderings, the discomforts of shipboard and of stations in the colonies, bad servants, and unwonted sicknesses, the Captain's tenderness never failed. If the life was rough the Captain was ready. He had been, by turns, in one strait or another, sick-nurse, doctor, carpenter, nursemaid, and cook to his family, and had, moreover, an idea that nobody filled these offices quite so well as himself. Withal, his very profession kept him neat, well-dressed, and active. In the roughest of their ever-changing quarters he was a smarter man, more like the lover of his wife's young days, than Mr. Bull amid his stationary comforts. Then if the Captain's wife was—as her friends said—"never settled," she was also for ever entertained by new scenes ; and domestic mischances do not weigh very heavily on people whose possessions are few and their intellectual interests many. It is true that there were ladies in the Captain's regiment

who passed by sea and land from one quarter of the globe to another, amid strange climates and customs, strange trees and flowers, beasts and birds, from the glittering snows of North America to the orchids of the Cape, from beautiful Pera to the lily-covered hills of Japan, and who in no place rose above the fret of domestic worries, and had little to tell on their return but of the universal misconduct of servants, from Irish "helps" in the colonies, to *compradors* and China-boys at Shanghai. But it was not so with the Captain's wife. Moreover, one becomes accustomed to one's fate, and she moved her whole establishment from the Curragh to Corfu with less anxiety than that felt by Mrs. Bull over a port-wine stain on the best table-cloth.

And yet, as years went and children came, the Captain and his wife grew tired of travelling. New scenes were small comfort when they heard of the death of old friends. One foot of murky English sky was dearer, after all, than miles of the unclouded heavens of the South. The grey hills and overgrown lanes of her old home haunted the Captain's wife by night and day, and home-sickness (that weariest of all sicknesses) began to take the light out of her eyes before their time. It preyed upon the Captain too. Now and then he would say, fretfully, "I *should* like an English resting-place, however small, before *every-*

body is dead ! But the children's prospects have to be considered." The continued estrangement from the old man was an abiding sorrow also, and they had hopes that, if only they could get to England, he might be persuaded to peace and charity this time.

At last they were sent home. But the hard old father still would not relent. He returned their letters unopened. This bitter disappointment made the Captain's wife so ill that she almost died, and in one month the Captain's hair became iron-grey. He reproached himself for having ever taken the daughter from her father, "to kill her at last," as he said. And (thinking of his own children) he even reproached himself for having robbed the old widower of his only child. After two years at home his regiment was ordered to India. He failed to effect an exchange, and they prepared to move once more—from Chatham to Calcutta. Never before had the packing, to which she was so well accustomed, been so bitter a task to the Captain's wife.

It was at the darkest hour of this gloomy time that the Captain came in, waving above his head a letter which changed all their plans.

Now close by the old home of the Captain's wife there had lived a man, much older than herself, who yet had loved her with a devotion as great as that of the young Captain. She never knew it, for when he

saw that she had given her heart to his younger rival, he kept silence, and he never asked for what he knew he might have had—the old man's authority in his favour. So generous was the affection which he could never conquer, that he constantly tried to reconcile the father to his children whilst he lived, and, when he died, he bequeathed his house and small estate to the woman he had loved.

“It will be a legacy of peace,” he thought, on his death-bed. “The old man cannot hold out when she and her children are constantly in sight. And it may please GOD that I shall know of the reunion I have not been permitted to see with my eyes.”

And thus it came about that the Captain's regiment went to India without him, and that the Captain's wife and her father lived on opposite sides of the same road.

MASTER ROBERT.

The eldest of the Captain's children was a boy. He was named Robert, after his grandfather, and seemed to have inherited a good deal of the old gentleman's character, mixed with gentler traits. He was a fair, fine boy, tall and stout for his age, with the Captain's regular features, and (he flattered himself) the Captain's firm step and martial bearing. He was apt—like

his grandfather—to hold his own will to be other people's law, and (happily for the peace of the nursery) this opinion was devoutly shared by his brother Nicholas. Though the Captain had sold his commission, Robin continued to command an irregular force of volunteers in the nursery, and never was colonel more despotic. His brothers and sister were by turn infantry, cavalry, engineers, and artillery, according to his whim, and when his affections finally settled upon the Highlanders of "The Black Watch," no female power could compel him to keep his stockings above his knees, or his knickerbockers below them.

The Captain alone was a match for his strong-willed son.

"If you please, sir," said Sarah, one morning, flouncing in upon the Captain, just as he was about to start for the neighbouring town,—“if you please, sir, I wish you'd speak to Master Robert. He's past my powers.”

“I've no doubt of it,” thought the Captain, but he only said, “Well, what's the matter?”

“Night after night do I put him to bed,” said Sarah, “and night after night does he get up as soon as I'm out of the room, and says he's orderly officer for the evening, and goes about in his night-shirt, and his feet as bare as boards.”

The Captain fingered his heavy moustache to hide a smile, but he listened patiently to Sarah's complaints.

"It ain't so much *him* I should mind, sir," she continued, "but he goes round the beds and wakes up the other young gentlemen and Miss Dora, one after another, and when I speak to him, he gives me all the sauce he can lay his tongue to, and says he's going round the guards. The other night I tried to put him back in his bed, but he got away and ran all over the house, me hunting him everywhere, and not a sign of him, till he jumps out on me from the garret-stairs and nearly knocks me down. 'I've visited the outposts, Sarah,' says he; 'all's well.' And off he goes to bed as bold as brass."

"Have you spoken to your mistress?" asked the Captain.

"Yes, sir," said Sarah. "And missis spoke to him, and he promised not to go round the guards again."

"Has he broken his promise?" asked the Captain, with a look of anger, and also of surprise.

"When I opened the door last night, sir," continued Sarah, in her shrill treble, "what should I see in the dark but Master Robert a-walking up and down with the carpet-brush stuck in his arm. 'Who goes there?' says he. 'You owdacious boy!' says I.

‘Didn’t you promise your ma you’d leave off them tricks?’ ‘I’m not going round the guards,’ says he; ‘I promised not. But I’m for sentry-duty to-night.’ And say what I would to him, all he had for me was, ‘You mustn’t speak to a sentry on duty.’ So I says, ‘As sure as I live till morning, I’ll go to your pa,’ for he pays no more attention to his ma than to me, nor to any one else.”

“Please to see that the chair-bed in my dressing-room is moved into your mistress’s bedroom,” said the Captain. “I will attend to Master Robert.”

With this Sarah had to content herself, and she went back to the nursery. Robert was nowhere to be seen, and made no reply to her summons. On this the unwary nursemaid flounced into the bedroom to look for him, when Robert, who was hidden beneath a table, darted forth, and promptly locked her in.

“You’re under arrest,” he shouted, through the keyhole.

“Let me out!” shrieked Sarah.

“I’ll send a file of the guard to fetch you to the orderly room, by and by,” said Robert, “for ‘preferring frivolous complaints.’” And he departed to the farmyard to look at the ducks.

That night, when Robert went up to bed, the Captain quietly locked him into his dressing-room, from which the bed had been removed.

“You’re for sentry-duty to-night,” said the Captain. “The carpet-brush is in the corner. Good-evening.”

As his father anticipated, Robert was soon tired of the sentry game in these new circumstances, and long before the night had half worn away he wished himself safely undressed and in his own comfortable bed. At half-past twelve o’clock he felt as if he could bear it no longer, and knocked at the Captain’s door.

“Who goes there?” said the Captain.

“Mayn’t I go to bed, please?” whined poor Robert.

“Certainly not,” said the Captain. “You’re on duty.”

And on duty poor Robert had to remain, for the Captain had a will as well as his son. So he rolled himself up in his father’s railway-rug, and slept on the floor.

The next night he was very glad to go quietly to bed, and remain there.

IN THE NURSERY.

The Captain’s children sat at breakfast in a large, bright nursery. It was the room where the old bachelor had died, and now *her* children made it merry. This was just what he would have wished.

They all sat round the table, for it was breakfast-time. There were five of them, and five bowls of boiled bread-and-milk smoked before them. Sarah (a foolish, gossiping girl, who acted as nurse till better could be found) was waiting on them, and by the table sat Darkie, the black retriever, his long, curly back swaying slightly from the difficulty of holding himself up, and his solemn hazel eyes fixed very intently on each and all of the breakfast bowls. He was as silent and sagacious as Sarah was talkative and empty-headed. The expression of his face was that of King Charles I. as painted by Vandyke. Though large, he was unassuming. Pax, the pug, on the contrary, who came up to the first joint of Darkie's leg, stood defiantly on his dignity (and his short stumps). He always placed himself in front of the bigger dog, and made a point of hustling him in doorways and of going first downstairs. He strutted like a beadle, and carried his tail more tightly curled than a bishop's crook. He looked as one may imagine the frog in the fable would have looked, had he been able to swell himself rather nearer to the size of the ox. This was partly due to his very prominent eyes, and partly to an obesity favoured by habits of lying inside the fender, and of eating meals proportioned more to his consequence than to his hunger. They were both favourites of two years' standing, and had very nearly been given away, when

the good news came of an English home for the family, dogs and all.

Robert's tongue was seldom idle, even at meals. "Are you a Yorkshirewoman, Sarah?" he asked, pausing, with his spoon full in his hand.

"No, Master Robert," said Sarah.

"But you understand Yorkshire, don't you? I can't, very often; but Mamma can, and can speak it, too. Papa says Mamma always talks Yorkshire to servants and poor people. She used to talk Yorkshire to Themistocles, Papa said, and he said it was no good; for though Themistocles knew a lot of languages, he didn't know that. And Mamma laughed, and said she didn't know she did."—"Themistocles was our man-servant in Corfu," Robin added, in explanation. "He stole lots of things, Themistocles did; but Papa found him out."

Robin now made a rapid attack on his bread-and-milk, after which he broke out again.

"Sarah, who is that tall old gentleman at church, in the seat near the pulpit? He wears a cloak like what the Blues wear, only all blue, and is tall enough for a Lifeguardsman. He stood when we were kneeling down, and said *Almighty and most merciful Father* louder than anybody."

Sarah knew who the old gentleman was, and knew also that the children did not know, and that their

parents did not see fit to tell them as yet. But she had a passion for telling and hearing news, and would rather gossip with a child than not gossip at all. "Never you mind, Master Robin," she said, nodding sagaciously. "Little boys aren't to know everything."

"Ah, then, I know you don't know," replied Robert; "if you did, you'd tell. Nicholas give some of your bread to Darkie and Pax. I've done mine. *For what we have received, the Lord make us truly thankful.* Say your grace and put your chair away, and come along. I want to hold a court-martial!" And seizing his own chair by the seat, Robin carried it swiftly to its corner. As he passed Sarah, he observed tauntingly, "You pretend to know, but you don't."

"I do," said Sarah.

"You don't," said Robin.

"Your ma's forbid you to contradict, Master Robin," said Sarah; "and if you do I shall tell her. I know well enough who the old gentleman is, and perhaps I might tell you, only you'd go straight off and tell again."

"No, no, I wouldn't!" shouted Robin. "I can keep a secret, indeed I can! Pinch my little finger, and try. Do, do tell me, Sarah, there's a dear Sarah, and then I shall know you know." And he danced round her, catching at her skirts.

To keep a secret was beyond Sarah's powers.

"Do let my dress be, Master Robin," she said, "you're ripping out all the gathers, and listen while I whisper. As sure as you're a living boy, that gentleman's your own grandpapa."

Robin lost his hold on Sarah's dress ; his arms fell by his side, and he stood with his brows knit for some minutes, thinking. Then he said, emphatically, "What lies you do tell, Sarah !"

"Oh, Robin !" cried Nicholas, who had drawn near, his thick curls standing stark with curiosity, "Mamma said 'lies' wasn't a proper word, and you promised not to say it again."

"I forgot," said Robin. "I didn't mean to break my promise. But she does tell—ahem ! *you know what.*"

"You wicked boy !" cried the enraged Sarah ; "how dare you to say such a thing ! and everybody in the place knows he's your ma's own pa."

"I'll go and ask her," said Robin, and he was at the door in a moment ; but Sarah, alarmed by the thought of getting into a scrape herself, caught him by the arm.

"Don't you go, love ; it'll only make your ma angry. There ; it was all my nonsense."

"Then it's not true ?" said Robin, indignantly. "What did you tell me so for ?"

“It was all my jokes and nonsense,” said the unscrupulous Sarah. “But your ma wouldn’t like to know I’ve said such a thing. And Master Robert wouldn’t be so mean as to tell tales, would he, love?”

“I’m not mean,” said Robin, stoutly; “and I don’t tell tales; but you do, and you tell *you know what*, besides. However, I won’t go this time; but I’ll tell you what—if you tell tales of me to Papa any more, I’ll tell him what you said about the old gentleman in the blue cloak.” With which parting threat Robin strode off to join his brothers and sister.

Sarah’s tale had put the court-martial out of his head, and he leaned against the tall fender, gazing at his little sister, who was tenderly nursing a well-worn doll. Robin sighed.

“What a long time that doll takes to wear out, Dora!” said he. “When will it be done?”

“Oh, not yet, not yet!” cried Dora, clasping the doll to her, and turning away. “She’s quite good, yet.”

“How miserly you are,” said her brother; “and selfish, too; for you know I can’t have a military funeral till you’ll let me bury that old thing.”

Dora began to cry.

“There you go, crying!” said Robin, impatiently. “Look here: I won’t take it till you get the new one

on your birthday. You can't be so mean as not to let me have it then !”

But Dora's tears still fell. “I love this one so much,” she sobbed. “I love her better than the new one.”

“You want both ; that's it,” said Robin, angrily. “Dora, you're the meanest girl I ever knew !”

At which unjust and painful accusation Dora threw herself and the doll upon their faces, and wept bitterly. The eyes of the soft-hearted Nicholas began to fill with tears, and he squatted down before her, looking most dismal. He had a fellow-feeling for her attachment to an old toy, and yet Robin's will was law to him.

“Couldn't we make a coffin, and pretend the body was inside?” he suggested.

“No, we couldn't,” said Robin. “I wouldn't play the Dead March after an empty candle-box. It's a great shame—and I promised she should be chaplain in one of my night-gowns, too.”

“Perhaps you'll get just as fond of the new one,” said Nicholas, turning to Dora.

But Dora only cried, “No, no ! He shall have the new one to bury, and I'll keep my poor, dear, darling Betsy.” And she clasped Betsy tighter than before.

“That's the meanest thing you've said yet,” re-

torted Robin ; “for you know Mamma wouldn’t let me bury the new one.” And, with an air of great disgust, he quitted the nursery.

“A MUMMING WE WILL GO.”

Nicholas had sore work to console his little sister, and Betsy’s prospects were in a very unfavourable state, when a diversion was caused in her favour by a new whim which put the military funeral out of Robin’s head.

After he left the nursery he strolled out of doors, and, peeping through the gate at the end of the drive, he saw a party of boys going through what looked like a military exercise with sticks and a good deal of stamping ; but, instead of mere words of command, they all spoke by turns, as in a play. In spite of their strong Yorkshire accent, Robin overheard a good deal, and it sounded very fine. Not being at all shy, he joined them, and asked so many questions that he soon got to know all about it. They were practising a Christmas mumming-play, called “The Peace Egg.” Why it was called thus they could not tell, as there was nothing whatever about eggs in it, and so far from being a play of peace, it was made up of a series of battles between certain valiant knights and princes, of whom St. George of England was the chief and

conqueror. The rehearsal being over, Robin went with the boys to the sexton's house (he was father to the "King of Egypt"), where they showed him the dresses they were to wear. These were made of gay-coloured materials, and covered with ribbons, except that of the "Black Prince of Paradine," which was black, as became his title. The boys also showed him the book from which they learned their parts, and which was to be bought for one penny at the post-office shop.

"Then are you the mummers who come round at Christmas, and act in people's kitchens, and people give them money, that Mamma used to tell us about?" said Robin.

St. George of England looked at his companions as if for counsel as to how far they might commit themselves, and then replied, with Yorkshire caution, "Well, I suppose we are."

"And do you go out in the snow from one house to another at night? and oh, don't you enjoy it?" cried Robin.

"We like it well enough," St. George admitted.

Robin bought a copy of "The Peace Egg." He was resolved to have a nursery performance, and to act the part of St. George himself. The others were willing for what he wished, but there were difficulties. In the first place, there are eight characters in the

play, and there were only five children. They decided among themselves to leave out the "Fool," and Mamma said that another character was not to be acted by any of them, or indeed mentioned; "the little one who comes in at the end," Robin explained. Mamma had her reasons, and these were always good. She had not been altogether pleased that Robin had bought the play. It was a very old thing, she said, and very queer; not adapted for a child's play. If Mamma thought the parts not quite fit for the children to learn, they found them much too long; so in the end she picked out some bits for each, which they learned easily, and which, with a good deal of fighting, made quite as good a story of it as if they had done the whole. What may have been wanting otherwise was made up for by the dresses, which were charming.

Robin was St. George, Nicholas the Valiant Slasher, Dora the Doctor, and the other two Hector and the King of Egypt. "And now we've no Black Prince!" cried Robin in dismay.

"Let Darkie be the Black Prince," said Nicholas. "When you wave your stick he'll jump for it, and then you can pretend to fight with him."

"It's not a stick, it's a sword," said Robin. "However, Darkie may be the Black Prince."

"And what's Pax to be?" asked Dora; "for you

know he will come if Darkie does, and he'll run in before everybody else too."

"Then he must be the Fool," said Robin, "and it will do very well, for the Fool comes in before the rest, and Pax can have his red coat on, and the collar with the little bells."

CHRISTMAS EVE.

Robin thought that Christmas would never come. To the Captain and his wife it seemed to come too fast. They had hoped it might bring reconciliation with the old man, but it seemed they had hoped in vain.

There were times now when the Captain almost regretted the old bachelor's bequest. The familiar scenes of her old home sharpened his wife's grief. To see her father every Sunday in church, with marks of age and infirmity upon him, but with not a look of tenderness for his only child, this tried her sorely.

"She felt it less abroad," thought the Captain. "An English home in which she frets herself to death is, after all, no great boon."

Christmas Eve came.

"I'm sure it's quite Christmas enough now," said Robin. "We'll have 'The Peace Egg' to-night."

So as the Captain and his wife sat sadly over their

fire, the door opened, and Pax ran in shaking his bells, and followed by the nursery mummers. The performance was most successful. It was by no means pathetic, and yet, as has been said, the Captain's wife shed tears.

"What is the matter, Mamma?" said St. George, abruptly dropping his sword and running up to her.

"Don't tease Mamma with questions," said the Captain; "she is not very well, and rather sad. We must all be very kind and good to poor dear Mamma;" and the Captain raised his wife's hand to his lips as he spoke. Robin seized the other hand and kissed it tenderly. He was very fond of his mother. At this moment Pax took a little run, and jumped on to Mamma's lap, where, sitting facing the company, he opened his black mouth and yawned, with a ludicrous inappropriateness worthy of any clown. It made everybody laugh.

"And now we'll go and act in the kitchen," said Nicholas.

"Supper at nine o'clock, remember," shouted the Captain. "And we are going to have real frumenty and Yule cakes, such as Mamma used to tell us of when we were abroad."

"Hurray!" shouted the mummers, and they ran off, Pax leaping from his seat just in time to hustle the Black Prince in the doorway. When the dining-

room door was shut, St. George raised his hand, and said "Hush!"

The mummers pricked their ears, but there was only a distant harsh and scraping sound, as of stones rubbed together.

"They're cleaning the passages," St. George went on, "and Sarah told me they meant to finish the mistletoe, and have everything cleaned up by supper-time. They don't want us, I know. Look here, we'll go *real mumming* instead. That *will* be fun!"

The Valiant Slasher grinned with delight.

"But will mamma let us?" he inquired.

"Oh, it will be all right if we're back by supper-time," said St. George, hastily. "Only of course we must take care not to catch cold. Come and help me to get some wraps."

The old oak chest in which spare shawls, rugs, and coats were kept was soon ransacked, and the mummers' gay dresses hidden by motley wrappers. But no sooner did Darkie and Pax behold the coats, &c., than they at once began to leap and bark, as it was their custom to do when they saw any one dressing to go out. Robin was sorely afraid that this would betray them; but though the Captain and his wife heard the barking they did not guess the cause.

So the front door being very gently opened and closed, the nursery mummers stole away.

THE NURSERY MUMMERS AND THE OLD MAN.

It was a very fine night. The snow was well trodden on the drive, so that it did not wet their feet, but on the trees and shrubs it hung soft and white.

“It’s much jollier being out at night than in the daytime,” said Robin.

“Much,” responded Nicholas, with intense feeling.

“We’ll go a wassailing next week,” said Robin. “I know all about it, and perhaps we shall get a good lot of money, and then we’ll buy tin swords with scabbards for next year. I don’t like these sticks. Oh, dear, I wish it wasn’t so long between one Christmas and another.”

“Where shall we go first?” asked Nicholas, as they turned into the high-road. But before Robin could reply, Dora clung to Nicholas, crying, “Oh, look at those men!”

The boys looked up the road, down which three men were coming in a very unsteady fashion, and shouting as they rolled from side to side.

“They’re drunk,” said Nicholas; “and they’re shouting at us.”

“Oh, run, run!” cried Dora; and down the road they ran, the men shouting and following them. They had not run far, when Hector caught his foot in the

Captain's great-coat, which he was wearing, and came down headlong in the road. They were close by a gate, and when Nicholas had set Hector upon his legs, St. George hastily opened it.

"This is the first house," he said. "We'll act here;" and all, even the Valiant Slasher, pressed in as quickly as possible. Once safe within the grounds, they shouldered their sticks, and resumed their composure.

"You're going to the front door," said Nicholas. "Mummers ought to go to the back."

"We don't know where it is," said Robin, and he rang the front-door bell. There was a pause. Then lights shone, steps were heard, and at last a sound of much unbarring, unbolting, and unlocking. It might have been a prison. Then the door was opened by an elderly, timid-looking woman, who held a tallow candle above her head.

"Who's there," she said, "at this time of night?"

"We're Christmas mummers," said Robin, stoutly; "we don't know the way to the back door, but——"

"And don't you know better than to come here?" said the woman. "Be off with you, as fast as you can."

"You're only the servant," said Robin. "Go and ask your master and mistress if they wouldn't like to see us act. We do it very well."

“You impudent boy, be off with you!” repeated the woman. “Master’d no more let you nor any other such rubbish set foot in this house——”

“Woman!” shouted a voice close behind her, which made her start as if she had been shot, “who authorizes you to say what your master will or will not do, before you’ve asked him? The boy is right. You *are* the servant, and it is not your business to choose for me whom I shall or shall not see.”

“I meant no harm, sir, I’m sure,” said the housekeeper; “but I thought you’d never——”

“My good woman,” said her master, “if I had wanted somebody to think for me, you’re the last person I should have employed. I hire you to obey orders, not to think.”

“I’m sure, sir,” said the housekeeper, whose only form of argument was reiteration, “I never thought you would have seen them——”

“Then you were wrong,” shouted her master. “I will see them. Bring them in.”

He was a tall, gaunt old man, and Robin stared at him for some minutes, wondering where he could have seen somebody very like him. At last he remembered. It was the old gentleman of the blue cloak.

The children threw off their wraps, the housekeeper helping them, and chattering ceaselessly, from sheer nervousness.

“Well, to be sure,” said she, “their dresses are pretty too. And they seem quite a better sort of children, they talk quite genteel. I might ha’ knowed they weren’t like common mummers, but I was so flusterated hearing the bell go so late, and——”

“Are they ready?” said the old man, who had stood like a ghost in the dim light of the flaring tallow candle, grimly watching the proceedings.

“Yes, sir. Shall I take them to the kitchen, sir?”

“——for you and the other idle hussies to gape and grin at? No. Bring them to the library,” he snapped, and then stalked off, leading the way.

The housekeeper accordingly led them to the library, and then withdrew, nearly falling on her face as she left the room by stumbling over Darkie, who slipped in last like a black shadow.

The old man was seated in a carved oak chair by the fire.

“I never said the dogs were to come in,” he said.

“But we can’t do without them, please,” said Robin, boldly. “You see there are eight people in ‘The Peace Egg,’ and there are only five of us; and so Darkie has to be the Black Prince, and Pax has to be the Fool, and so we have to have them.”

“Five and two make seven,” said the old man, with a grim smile; “what do you do for the eighth?”

“Oh, that’s the little one at the end,” said Robin, confidentially. “Mamma said we weren’t to mention him, but I think that’s because we’re children.—You’re grown up, you know, so I’ll show you the book, and you can see for yourself,” he went on, drawing “The Peace Egg” from his pocket : “there, that’s the picture of him, on the last page ; black, with horns and a tail.”

The old man’s stern face relaxed into a broad smile as he examined the grotesque woodcut ; but when he turned to the first page the smile vanished in a deep frown, and his eyes shone like hot coals with anger. He had seen Robin’s name.

“Who sent you here ?” he asked, in a hoarse voice. “Speak, and speak the truth ! Did your mother send you here ? ”

Robin thought the old man was angry with them for playing truant. He said, slowly, “N—no. She didn’t exactly send us ; but I don’t think she’ll mind our having come if we get back in time for supper. Mamma never *forbid* our going mumming, you know.”

“I don’t suppose she ever thought of it,” Nicholas said, candidly, wagging his curly head from side to side.

“She knows we’re mummers,” said Robin, “for she helped us. When we were abroad, you know,

she used to tell us about the mummers acting at Christmas, when she was a little girl; and so we thought we'd be mummers, and so we acted to Papa and Mamma, and so we thought we'd act to the maids, but they were cleaning the passages, and so we thought we'd really go mumming; and we've got several other houses to go to before supper-time; we'd better begin, I think," said Robin; and without more ado he began to march round and round, raising his sword and shouting—

"I am St. George, who from Old England sprung,
My famous name throughout the world hath rung."

And the performance went off quite as creditably as before.

As the children acted the old man's anger wore off. He watched them with an interest he could not repress. When Nicholas took some hard thwacks from St. George without flinching, the old man clapped his hands; and, after the encounter between St. George and the Black Prince, he said he would not have had the dogs excluded on any consideration. It was just at the end, when they were all marching round and round, holding on by each other's swords "over the shoulder," and singing "A mumming we will go," &c., that Nicholas suddenly brought the circle to a standstill by stopping dead short, and staring up at the wall before him.

“What *are* you stopping for?” said St. George, turning indignantly round.

“Look there!” cried Nicholas, pointing to a little painting which hung above the old man’s head.

Robin looked, and said, abruptly, “It’s Dora.”

“Which is Dora?” asked the old man, in a strange, sharp tone.

“Here she is,” said Robin and Nicholas in one breath, as they dragged her forward.

“She’s the Doctor,” said Robin; “and you can’t see her face for her things. Dor, take off your cap and pull back that hood. There! Oh, it *is* like her!”

It was a portrait of her mother as a child; but of this the nursery mummies knew nothing. The old man looked as the peaked cap and hood fell away from Dora’s face and fair curls, and then he uttered a sharp cry, and buried his head upon his hands. The boys stood stupefied, but Dora ran up to him, and putting her little hands on his arms, said, in childish pitying tones, “Oh, I am so sorry! Have you got a headache? May Robin put the shovel in the fire for you? Mamma has hot shovels for her headaches.” And, though the old man did not speak or move, she went on coaxing him, and stroking his head, on which the hair was white. At this moment Pax took one of his unexpected runs, and jumped on to the old man’s knee, in his own par-

ticular fashion, and then yawned at the company. The old man was startled, and lifted his face suddenly. It was wet with tears.

“Why, you’re crying!” exclaimed the children, with one breath.

“It’s very odd,” said Robin, fretfully. “I can’t think what’s the matter to-night. Mamma was crying too when we were acting, and Papa said we weren’t to tease her with questions, and he kissed her hand, and I kissed her hand too. And Papa said we must all be very good and kind to poor dear Mamma, and so I mean to be, she’s so good. And I think we’d better go home, or perhaps she’ll be frightened,” Robin added.

“She’s so good, is she?” asked the old man. He had put Pax off his knee, and taken Dora on to it.

“Oh, isn’t she!” said Nicholas, swaying his curly head from side to side as usual.

“She’s always good,” said Robin, emphatically; “and so’s Papa. But I’m always doing something I oughtn’t to,” he added, slowly. “But then, you know, I don’t pretend to obey Sarah. I don’t care a fig for Sarah; and I won’t obey any woman but Mamma.”

“Who’s Sarah?” asked the grandfather.

“She’s our nurse,” said Robin, “and she tells—I mustn’t say what she tells—but it’s not the truth. She told one about *you* the other day,” he added.

"About me?" said the old man.

"She said you were our grandpapa. So then I knew she was telling *you know what.*"

"How did you know it wasn't true?" the old man asked.

"Why, of course," said Robin, "if you were our Mamma's father, you'd know her, and be very fond of her, and come and see her. And then you'd be our grandfather, too, and you'd have us to see you, and perhaps give us Christmas-boxes. I wish you were," Robin added with a sigh. "It would be very nice."

"Would *you* like it?" asked the old man of Dora.

And Dora, who was half asleep and very comfortable, put her little arms about his neck as she was wont to put them round the Captain's, and said, "Very much."

He put her down at last, very tenderly, almost unwillingly, and left the children alone. By and by he returned, dressed in the blue cloak, and took Dora up again.

"I will see you home," he said.

The children had not been missed. The clock had only just struck nine when there came a knock on the door of the dining-room, where the Captain and his wife still sat by the Yule log. She said "Come

in," wearily, thinking it was the frumenty and the Christmas cakes.

But it was her father, with her child in his arms!

PEACE AND GOODWILL.

Lucy Jane Bull and her sisters were quite old enough to understand a good deal of grown-up conversation when they overheard it. Thus, when a friend of Mrs. Bull's observed during an afternoon call that she believed that "officers' wives were very dressy," the young ladies were at once resolved to keep a sharp look-out for the Captain's wife's bonnet in church on Christmas Day.

The Bulls had just taken their seats when the Captain's wife came in. They really would have hid their faces, and looked at the bonnet afterwards, but for the startling sight that met the gaze of the congregation. The old grandfather walked into church abreast of the Captain.

"They've met in the porch," whispered Mr. Bull, under the shelter of his hat.

"They can't quarrel publicly in a place of worship," said Mrs. Bull, turning pale.

"She's gone into his seat," cried Lucy Jane in a shrill whisper.

“And the children after her,” added the other sister, incautiously aloud.

There was now no doubt about the matter. The old man in his blue cloak stood for a few moments politely disputing the question of precedence with his handsome son-in-law. Then the Captain bowed and passed in, and the old man followed him.

By the time that the service was ended everybody knew of the happy peacemaking, and was glad. One old friend after another came up with blessings and good wishes. This was a proper Christmas, indeed, they said. There was a general rejoicing.

But only the grandfather and his children knew that it was hatched from “The Peace Egg.”

A CHRISTMAS MUMMING PLAY.

A CHRISTMAS MUMMING PLAY.

INTRODUCTION.

SINCE a little story of mine called "The Peace Egg" appeared in *Aunt Judy's Magazine*, I have again and again been asked where the Mumming Play could be found which gave its name to my tale, and if real children could act it, as did the fancy children of my story.

As it stands, this old Christmas Mumming Play (which seems to have borrowed the name of an Easter Entertainment or Pasque Egg) is not fit for domestic performance; and though probably there are few nurseries in those parts of England where "mumming" and the sword-dance still linger, in which the children do not play some version of St. George's exploits, a little of the dialogue goes a long way, and the mummery (which must almost be seen to be imitated) is the chief matter.

In fact, the mummery *is* the chief matter—which is what makes the play so attractive to children, and, it may be added, so suitable for their performance. In its rudeness, its simplicity, its fancy dressing, the rapid action of the plot, and last, but not least, its *bludginess*—that quality which made the history of Goliath so dear to the youngest of Helen's Babies!—it is adapted for nursery amusement, as the Drama of Punch and Judy is, and for similar reasons.

For some little time past I have purposed to try and blend the various versions of "Peace Egg" into one Mummery for the nursery, with as little change of the old rhymes as might be. I have been again urged to do so this Christmas, and though I have not been able to give so much time or research to it as I should have liked, I have thought it better to do it without further delay, even if somewhat imperfectly.

To shuffle the characters and vary the text is nothing new in the history of these "Mock Plays," as they were sometimes called.

They are probably of very ancient origin—"Pagan, I regret to say," as Mr. Pecksniff observed in reference to the sirens—and go back to "the heathen custom of going about on the Kalends of January in disguises, as wild beasts and cattle, the sexes changing apparel." (There is a relic of this last unseemly custom still in "The Old Tup" and "The Old Horse"; when these

are performed by both girls and boys, the latter wear skirts and bonnets, the former hats and great-coats ; this is also the case in Scotland where the boys and girls go round at Hogmanay.)

In the 12th century the clergy introduced miracle plays and Scripture histories to rival the performances of the strolling players, which had become very gross. They became as popular as beneficial, and London was famous for them. Different places, and even trade-guilds and schools, had their differing "mysteries."

Secular plays continued, and the two seem occasionally to have got mixed. Into one of the oldest of old plays, "St. George and the Dragon," the Crusaders and Pilgrims introduced the Eastern characters who still remain there. This is the foundation of "The Peace Egg." About the middle of the 15th century, plays, which, not quite religious, still witnessed to the effect of the religious plays in raising the standard of public taste, appeared under the name of "Morals," or "Moralities."

Christmas plays, masques, pageants, and the like were largely patronized by the Tudor sovereigns, and the fashion set by the Court was followed in the country. Queen Elizabeth was not only devoted to the drama, and herself performed, but she was very critical and exacting ; and the high demand which she did so much to stimulate, was followed by such supply

as was given by the surpassing dramatic genius of the Elizabethan age of literature. Later, Ben Jonson and Inigo Jones combined to produce the Court masks, one of which,—the well-known “Mask of Christmas,” had for chief characters, Christmas and his children, Misrule, Carol, Mince Pie, Gambol, Post and Pair, New Year’s Gift, Mumming, Wassel, Offering, and Baby’s Cake. In the 17th century the Christmas Mummeries of the Inns of Court were conducted with great magnificence and at large cost.

All such entertainments were severely suppressed during the Commonwealth, at which time the words “Welcome, or not welcome, I am come,” were introduced into Father Christmas’s part.

At one time the Jester of the piece (he is sometimes called the Jester, and sometimes the Fool, or the Old Fool) used to wear a calf’s hide. Robin Goodfellow says, “I’ll go put on my devilish robes—I mean my Christmas calf’s-skin suit—and then walk to the woods.” “I’ll put me on my great carnation nose, and wrap me in a rousing calf-skin suit, and come like some hobgoblin.” And a character of the 18th century “clears the way” with—

“My name is Captain Calftail, Calftail—
And on my back it is plain to be seen,
Although I am simple and wear a fool’s cap,
I am dearly beloved of a queen—”

which looks as if Titania had found her way into that mummerly !

“The Hobby Horse’s” costume was a horse’s hide, real or imitated. I have no copy of a Christmas Play in which the Hobby Horse appears. In the north of England, “The Old Horse” and “The Old Tup” are the respective heroes of their own peculiar mummeries, generally performed by a younger, or perhaps a rougher, set of lads than those who play the more elegant mysteries of St. George. The boy who acts “Old Tup” has a ram’s head impaled upon a short pole, which he grasps and uses as a sort of wooden leg in front of him. He needs some extra support, his back being bent as if for leap-frog, and covered with an old rug (in days when “meat” was cheaper it was probably a hide). The hollow sound of his peg-leg upon the “flags” of the stone passages and kitchen floor, and the yearly test of courage supplied by the rude familiarities of his gruesome head as he charged and dispersed maids and children, amid shrieks and laughter, are probably familiar memories of all Yorkshire, Lancashire, and Derbyshire childhoods. I do not know if the Old Horse and the Old Tup belong to other parts of the British Isles. It is a rude and somewhat vulgar performance, especially if undertaken by older revellers, when the men wear skirts and bonnets, and the women don

great-coats and hats—the Fool, the Doctor, and a darker character with a besom, are often of the party, but the Knights of Christendom and the Eastern Potentates take no share in these proceedings, which are oftenest and most inoffensively performed by little boys not yet promoted to be “mummers.” It is, however, essential that one of them should have a good voice, true and tuneful enough to sing a long ballad, and lead the chorus.

In the scale of contributions to the numerous itinerant Christmas Boxes of Christmas week—such as the Ringers, the Waits, the Brass Band, the Hand-bells, the Mummers (Peace Egg), the Superior Mummers, who do more intricate sword-play (and in the North Riding are called Morris Dancers), &c. &c., the Old Tup stands low down on the list. I never heard the Rhymes of the Old Horse ; they cannot be the same. These diversions are very strictly localized and handed on by word of mouth.

Of the best version of “Peace Egg” which I have seen performed, I have as yet quite vainly endeavoured to get any part transcribed. It is oral tradition. It is practised for some weeks beforehand, and the costumes, including wonderful head-dresses about the size of the plumed bonnet of a Highlander in full-dress, are carefully preserved from year to year. These pasteboard erections are covered with flowers,

feathers, bugles, and coloured streamers. The dresses are of coloured calico, with ribbons everywhere; "points" to the breeches and hose, shoulder-knots and sashes.

But, as a rough rule, it is one of the conveniences of mumming play, that the finery may be according to the taste and the resources of the company.

The swords are of steel, and those I have seen are short. In some places I believe rapiers are used. I am very sorry to be unable to give proper directions for the sword-play, which is so pretty. I have only one version in which such directions are given. I have copied the "Grand Sword Dance" in its proper place for the benefit of those who can interpret it. It is not easy to explain in writing even so much of it as I know. Each combat consists of the same number of cuts, to the best of my remembrance, and the "shoulder cuts" (which look very like two persons sharpening two knives as close as possible to each other's nose!) are in double time, twice as quick as the others. The stage directions are as follows:—

	A. and B. fight			
Cut 1	...	...	Crossing each other.	
	(They change places, striking as they pass.)			
Cut 2	...	...	,,	back.
Cut 3	...	...	,,	other.
Cut 4	...	...	,,	back.
	Four shoulder cuts.			
	A. loses his sword and falls.			

But I do not think the version from which this is an extract is at all an elaborate one. There ought to be a "Triumph," with an archway of swords, in the style of Sir Roger de Coverley. After the passing and repassing strokes, there is usually much more hand-to-hand fighting, then four shoulder cuts, and some are aimed high and some down among their ankles, in a way which would probably be quite clear to any one trained in broadsword exercise.

The following Christmas Mumming Play is compiled from five versions — the "Peace Egg," the "Wassail Cup," "Alexander the Great," "A Mock Play," and the "Silverton Mummer's Play" (Devon), which has been lent to me in manuscript.

The Mumming Chorus, "And a mumming we will go," &c., is not in any one of these versions, but I never saw mumming without it.

The Silverton version is an extreme example of the continuous development of these unwritten dramas. Generation after generation, the most incongruous characters have been added. In some cases this is a very striking testimony to the strength of rural sympathy with the great deeds and heroes of the time, as well as to native talent for dramatic composition.

Wellington and Wolfe almost eclipsed St. George in some parts of England, and the sea Heroes are naturally popular in Devonshire. The death of

Nelson in the Silverton play has fine dramatic touches. Though he "has but one arm and a good one too," he essays to fight—whether Tippo Saib or St. George is not made clear. He falls, and St. George calls for the Doctor in the usual words. The Doctor ends his peculiar harangue with: "Britons! our Nelson is dead." To which a voice, which seems to play the part of Greek chorus, responds—"But he is not with the dead, but in the arms of the Living God!" Then, enter Collingwood—

Collingwood—Here comes I, bold Collingwood,
 Who fought the French and boldly stood;
 And now the life of that bold Briton's gone,
 I'll put the crown of victory on"—

with which—"he takes the crown off Nelson's head and puts it on his own."

I have, however, confined myself in "The Peace Egg" to those characters which have the warrant of considerable antiquity, and their number is not small. They can easily be reduced by cutting out one or two; or some of the minor characters could play more than one part, by making real exits and changing the dress, instead of the conventional exit into the background of the group.

Some of these minor characters are not the least charming. The fair Sabra (who is often a mute) should be the youngest and prettiest little maid that

can toddle through her part, and no old family brocade can be too gorgeous for her. The Pretty Page is another part for a "very little one," and his velvets and laces should become him. They contrast delightfully with Dame Dolly and Little Man Jack, and might, if needful, be played by the same performers.

I have cut out everything that could possibly offend, except the line—"Take him and give him to the flies." It betrays an experience of Asiatic battle-fields so terribly real, that I was unwilling to abolish this unconscious witness to the influence of Pilgrims and Crusaders on the Peace Egg. It is easily omitted.

I have dismissed the Lord of Flies, Beelzebub, and (with some reluctance) "Little Devil Doubt" and his besom. I had a mind to have retained him as "The Demon of Doubt," for he plays in far higher dramas. His besom also seems to come from the East, where a figure "sweeping everything out" with a broom is the first vision produced in the crystal or liquid in the palm of a medium by the magicians of Egypt.

Those who wish to do so can admit him at the very end, after the sword dance, very black, and with a besom, a money-box, and the following doggrel :

In come I, the Demon of Doubt,
 If you don't give me money I'll sweep you all out ;
 Money I want and money I crave,
 Money I want and money I'll have.

He is not a taking character—unless to the antiquary !
 I have substituted the last line for the less decorous
 original, “If you don't give me money, I'll sweep you
 all to the grave.”

It is perhaps only the antiquary who will detect the
 connection between the Milk Pail and the Wassail
 Cup in the Fool's Song. But it seems at one time to
 have been made of milk. In a play of the 16th century
 it is described as—

“Wassayle, wassayle, out of the mylk payle ;
 Wassayle, wassalye, as white as my nayle,”

and Selden calls it “a slabby stuff,” which sounds as
 if it had got mixed up with frumenty.

Since the above went to press, I have received
 some extracts from the unwritten version of “Peace
 Egg” in the West Riding of Yorkshire to which I have
 alluded. They recall to me that the piece properly
 opens with a “mumming round,” different to the one
 I have given, *that* one belonging to the end. The
 first Mumming Song rehearses each character and his
 exploits. The hero of the verse which describes him
 singing (autobiographically !) his own doughty deeds
 in the third person. Thus St. George begins ; I give
 it in the vernacular.

“The first to coom in is the Champion bould,
 The Champion bould is he,
 He never fought battle i’ all his loife toim,
 But he made his bould enemy flee, flee, flee,
 He made his bould enemy flee.”

The beauty of this song is the precision with which each character enters and joins the slowly increasing circle. But that is its only merit. It is wretched doggrel, and would make the play far too tedious. I was, however, interested by this verse :—

The next to come in is the Cat and Calftail,
 The Cat and Calftail is he ;
 He’ll beg and he’ll borrow, and he’ll steal all he can,
 But he’ll never pay back one penny, penny,
 He’ll never pay back one penny.

Whether “Cat and Calftail” is a corruption of Captain Calftail or (more likely) Captain Calftail was evolved from a Fool in Calf’s hide and Cat’s skins, it is hard to say. They are evidently one and the same shabby personage !

The song which I have placed at the head of the Peace Egg Play has other verses which also recite “the argument” of the piece, but not one is worth recording. A third song does not, I feel sure, belong to the classic versions, but to another “rude and vulgar” one, which I have not seen for some years, and which was played in a dialect dark, even to those who flattered themselves that they were to the manner

But the true "Peace Egg," if *bludgy*, is essentially a heroic play, and I think the readers of *Aunt Judy's Magazine* will be content that I have omitted accretions which are not the less vulgar because they are old.

In refining and welding the piece together, I have introduced thirty lines of my own, in various places. The rest is genuine.

J. H. E.

THE PEACE EGG.

A CHRISTMAS MUMMING PLAY.

Written expressly for all Mummers, to commemorate the Holy Wars, and the happy Festival of Christmas.

DRAMATIS PERSONÆ.

- ST. GEORGE OF ENGLAND (*he must wear a rose*).
ST. ANDREW OF SCOTLAND (*he must wear a thistle*).
ST. PATRICK OF IRELAND (*he must wear the shamrock*).
ST. DAVID OF WALES (*he must wear a leek*).
SALADIN, A PAGAN GIANT OF PALESTINE (*a very tall grown-up actor would be effective*).
THE KING OF EGYPT (*in a turban and crown*).
THE PRINCE OF PARADINE, HIS SON (*face blacked, and it is "tradition" to play this part in weeds, as if he were Hamlet*).
THE TURKISH KNIGHT (*Eastern costume*).
HECTOR.
THE VALIANT SLASHER (*old yeomanry coat, &c., is effective*).
THE DRAGON (*a paste-board head, with horrid jaws, if possible. A tail, and paws with claws*).
THE FOOL (*Motley: with a bauble long enough to put over his shoulder and be held by the one behind in the mumming circle*).
OLD FATHER CHRISTMAS (*white beard, &c., and a staff*).

THE DOCTOR (*wig, spectacles, hat and cane*).

THE LITTLE PAGE (*pretty little boy in velvet, &c.*).

LITTLE MAN JACK (*big mask head, if convenient, short cloak and club*).

PRINCESS SABRA (*pretty little girl, gorgeously dressed, a crown*).

DAME DOLLY (*a large mask head, if possible, and a very amazing cap. Dame Dolly should bob curtseys and dance about*).

No scenery is required. The actors, as a rule, all come in together. To "enter" means to stand forth, and "exit" that the actor retires into the background. But the following method will be found most effective. Let Fool enter alone, and the rest come in one by one when the Fool begins to sing. They must march in to the music, and join the circle with regularity. Each actor as he "brags," and gives his challenge, does so marching up and down, his drawn sword over his shoulder. All the characters take part in the "Mumming Round." The next to Fair Sabra might hold up her train, and if Dame Dolly had a Gamp umbrella to put over *her* shoulder, it would not detract from her comic charms. The Trumpet Calls for the four Patron Knights should be appropriate to each. If a Trumpet is quite impossible, some one should play a national air as each champion enters.

Enter FOOL.

FOOL. Good morrow, friends and neighbours dear,
 We are right glad to meet you here,
 Christmas comes but once a year,
 But when it comes it brings good cheer,
 And when it's gone it's no longer near.
 May luck attend the milking-pail,
 Yule logs and cakes in plenty be,
 May each blow of the thrashing-flail
 Produce good frumenty.

And let the Wassail Cup abound,
Whene'er the mummers' time comes round.

Air, "Le Petit Tambour."

Sings. Now all ye jolly mummers
Who mum in Christmas time,
Come join with me in chorus,
Come join with me in rhyme.

[*He has laid his bauble over his shoulder, and it is taken by ST. GEORGE, who is followed by all the other actors, each laying his sword over his right shoulder and his left hand on the sword-point in front of him, and all marking time with their feet till the circle is complete, when they march round singing the chorus over and over again.*]

Chorus. And a mumming we will go, will go,
And a mumming we will go,
With a bright cockade in all our hats, we'll go with a
gallant show.

[*Disperse, and stand aside.*]

[*Enter FATHER CHRISTMAS.*]

FATHER CHRISTMAS. Here comes I, old Father
Christmas ;
Welcome, or welcome not,
I hope poor old Father Christmas
Will never be forgot !

My head is white, my back is bent,
My knees are weak, my strength is spent.
Eighteen hundred and eighty-three
Is a very great age for me.
And if I'd been growing all these years
What a monster I should be !
Now I have but a short time to stay,
And if you don't believe what I say—
Come in, Dame Dolly, and clear the way.

[*Enter DAME DOLLY.*]

DAME DOLLY. Here comes I, little Dame Dolly,
Wearing smart caps in all my folly.
If any gentleman takes my whim,
I'll set my holiday cap at him.
To laugh at my cap would be very rude ;
I wish you well, and I won't intrude.
Gentlemen now at the door do stand,
They will walk in with drawn swords in hand,
And if you don't believe what I say—
Let one Fool and four knights from the British Isles
come in and clear the way !

[*Enter FOOL and four Christian knights.*]

FOOL [*shaking his bells at intervals*].
Room, room, brave gallants, give us room to sport,
For to this room we wish now to resort :

Resort, and to repeat to you our merry rhyme,
For remember, good sirs, that this is Christmas time.
The time to make mince-pies doth now appear,
So we are come to act our merriment in here.
At the sounding of the trumpet, and beating of the
drum,

Make room, brave gentlemen, and let our actors come.
We are the merry actors that traverse the street,
We are the merry actors that fight for our meat,
We are the merry actors that show pleasant play.
Stand forth, St. George, thou champion, and clear the
way. [*Trumpet sounds for ST. GEORGE.*]

[*ST. GEORGE stands forth and walks up and down
with sword on shoulder.*]

ST. GEORGE. I am St. George, from good Old
England sprung,
My famous name throughout the world hath rung,
Many bloody deeds and wonders have I shown,
And made false tyrants tremble on their throne.
I followed a fair lady to a giant's gate,
Confined in dungeon deep to meet her fate.
Then I resolved with true knight-errantry
To burst the door, and set the captive free.
Far have I roamed, oft have I fought, and little do I
rest ;
All my delight is to defend the right, and succour the
opprest.

And now I'll slay the Dragon bold, my wonders to
begin ;
A fell and fiery Dragon he, but I will clip his wing.
I'll clip his wings, he shall not fly,
I'll rid the land of him, or else I'll die.

[*Enter THE DRAGON, with a sword over his shoulder.*]

DRAGON. Who is it seeks the Dragon's blood,
And calls so angry and so loud?
That English dog who looks so proud—
If I could catch him in my claw—
With my long teeth and horrid jaw,
Of such I'd break up half a score,
To stay my appetite for more.
Marrow from his bones I'd squeeze,
And suck his blood up by degrees.

[*ST. GEORGE and THE DRAGON fight. THE DRAGON
is killed. Exit DRAGON.*]

ST. GEORGE. I am St. George, that worthy cham-
pion bold,
And with my sword and spear I won three crowns of
gold.
I fought the fiery Dragon and brought him to the
slaughter,
By which behaviour I won the favour of the King of
Egypt's daughter.

Thus I have gained fair Sabra's hand, who long had
won her heart.

Stand forth, Egyptian Princess, and boldly act thy
part !

[*Enter THE PRINCESS SABRA.*]

SABRA. I am the Princess Sabra, and it is my
delight,
My chiefest pride, to be the bride of this gallant
Christian knight.

[*ST. GEORGE kneels and kisses her hand. FOOL
advances and holds up his hands over them.*]

FOOL. Why here's a sight will do any honest man's
heart good,
To see the Dragon-slayer thus subdued !

[*ST. GEORGE rises. Exit SABRA.*]

ST. GEORGE. Keep thy jests in thy pocket if thou
would'st keep thy head on thy shoulders.
I love a woman, and a woman loves me,
And when I want a fool I'll send for thee.
If there is any man but me
Who noxious beasts can tame,
Let him stand forth in this gracious company,
And boldly tell his name.

[*ST. GEORGE stands aside. Trumpet sounds for ST.
PATRICK.*]

[ST. PATRICK *stands forth.*]

ST. PATRICK. I am St. Patrick from the bogs,
 This truth I fain would learn ye,
 I banished serpents, toads, and frogs,
 From beautiful Hibernia.
 I flourished my shillelah
 And the reptiles all ran races,
 And they took their way into the sea,
 And they've never since shown their faces.

[*Enter* THE PRINCE OF PARADINE.]

PRINCE. I am black Prince of Paradine, born of
 high renown,
 Soon will I fetch thy lofty courage down.
 Cry grace; thou Irish conqueror of toads and frogs,
 Give me thy sword, or else I'll give thy carcase to the
 dogs.

ST. PATRICK. Now, Prince of Paradine, where
 have you been?
 And what fine sights pray have you seen?
 Dost think that no man of thy age
 Dares such a black as thee engage?
 Stand off, thou black Morocco dog, or by my sword
 thou'lt die,
 I'll pierce thy body full of holes, and make thy
 buttons fly.

[*They fight.* THE PRINCE OF PARADINE *is slain.*]

ST. PATRICK. Now Prince of Paradine is dead,
And all his joys entirely fled,
Take him and give him to the flies,
That he may never more come near my eyes.

[*Enter KING OF EGYPT.*]

KING. I am the King of Egypt, as plainly doth
appear ;
I am come to seek my son, my only son and heir.

ST. PATRICK. He's slain ! That's the worst
of it.

KING. Who did him slay, who did him kill,
And on the ground his precious blood did spill ?

ST. PATRICK. I did him slay, I did him kill,
And on the ground his precious blood did spill.
Please you, my liege, my honour to maintain,
As I have done, so would I do again.

KING. Cursed Christian ! What is this thou hast
done ?
Thou hast ruined me, slaying my only son.

ST. PATRICK. He gave me the challenge. Why
should I him deny ?
How low he lies who held himself so high !

KING. Oh ! Hector ! Hector ! help me with
speed,
For in my life I ne'er stood more in need.

[*Enter* HECTOR.]

KING. Stand not there, Hector, with sword in
hand,
But fight and kill at my command.

HECTOR. Yes, yes, my liege, I will obey,
And by my sword I hope to win the day.
If that be he who doth stand there
That slew my master's son and heir,
Though he be sprung from royal blood
I'll make it run like ocean flood.

[*They fight. HECTOR is wounded.*]

I am a valiant hero, and Hector is my name,
Many bloody battles have I fought, and always won
the same,
But from St. Patrick I received this deadly wound.

[*Trumpet sounds for* ST. ANDREW.]

Hark, hark, I hear the silver trumpet sound,
It summons me from off this bloody ground.
Down yonder is the way (*pointing*);
Farewell, farewell, I can no longer stay.

[*Exit* HECTOR.]

[*Enter* ST. ANDREW.]

KING. Is there never a doctor to be found
Can cure my son of his deep and deadly wound?

[*Enter* DOCTOR.]

DOCTOR. Yes, yes, there is a doctor to be found
Can cure your son of his deep and deadly wound.

KING. What's your fee?

DOCTOR. Five pounds and a yule cake to thee.
I have a little bottle of Elacampane,
It goes by the name of virtue and fame,
That will make this worthy champion to rise and fight
again.

[*To* PRINCE.] Here, sir, take a little of my flip-
flop,
Pour it on thy tip-top.

[*To audience, bowing.*]
Ladies and Gentlemen can have my advice gratis.

[*Exeunt* KING OF EGYPT, PRINCE OF PARADINE,
and DOCTOR.]

[ST. ANDREW *stands forth.*]

ST. ANDREW. I am St. Andrew from the
North,
Men from that part are men of worth ;
To travel south we're nothing loth,
And treat you fairly, by my troth.
Here comes a man looks ready for a fray.
Come in, come in, bold soldier, and bravely clear the
way.

[*Enter SLASHER.*]

SLASHER. I am a valiant soldier, and Slasher is
my name,
With sword and buckler by my side, I hope to win
more fame ;
And for to fight with me I see thou art not able,
So with my trusty broadsword I soon will thee disable.

ST. ANDREW. Disable, disable? It lies not in
thy power,
For with a broader sword than thine I soon will thee
devour.
Stand off, Slasher, let no more be said,
For if I draw my broadsword, I'm sure to break thy
head.

SLASHER. How canst thou break my head?
Since my head is made of iron ;
My body made of steel ;
My hands and feet of knuckle-bone.
I challenge thee to feel.

[*They fight, and SLASHER is wounded.*]

[*FOOL advances to SLASHER.*]

FOOL. Alas, alas, my chiefest son is slain !
What must I do to raise him up again ?
Here he lies before you all,
I'll presently for a doctor call.
A doctor ! A doctor ! I'll go and fetch a doctor.

DOCTOR. Here am I.

FOOL. Are you the doctor?

DOCTOR. That thou may plainly see, by my art
and activity.

FOOL. What's your fee to cure this poor man?

DOCTOR. Five pounds is my fee; but, Jack, as
thou art a fool, I'll only take ten from thee.

FOOL. You'll be a clever doctor if you get any.

[*Aside.*]

Well, how far have you travelled in doctorship?

DOCTOR. From the front door to the cupboard,
Cupboard to fireplace, fireplace up-stairs and into bed.

FOOL. So far, and no farther?

DOCTOR. Yes, yes, much farther.

FOOL. How far?

DOCTOR. Through England, Ireland, Scotland,
Flanders, France, and Spain,
And now am returned to cure the diseases of Old
England again.

FOOL. What can you cure?

DOCTOR. All complaints within and without,
From a cold in your head to a touch of the gout.
If any lady's figure is awry
I'll make her very fitting to pass by.

I'll give a coward a heart if he be willing,
Will make him stand without fear of killing.
Ribs, legs, or arms, whate'er you break, be sure
Of one or all I'll make a perfect cure.
Nay, more than this by far, I will maintain,
If you should lose your head or heart, I'll give it you
again.

Then here's a doctor rare, who travels much at home,
So take my pills, I'll cure all ills, past, present, or to
come.

I in my time many thousands have directed,
And likewise have as many more dissected,
And I never met a gravedigger who to me objected.
If a man gets nineteen bees in his bonnet, I'll cast
twenty of 'em out. I've got in my pocket
crutches for lame ducks, spectacles for blind
bumble-bees, pack-saddles and panniers for
grasshoppers, and many other needful things.
Surely I can cure this poor man.

Here, Slasher, take a little out of my bottle, and let
it run down thy throttle ; and if thou beest not
quite slain, rise, man, and fight again.

[SLASHER *rises.*]

SLASHER. Oh, my back !

FOOL. What's amiss with thy back ?

SLASHER. My back is wounded,
And my heart is confounded ;

To be struck out of seven senses into fourscore,
The like was never seen in Old England before.

[*Trumpet sounds for ST. DAVID.*]

Oh, hark ! I hear the silver trumpet sound !
It summons me from off this bloody ground.
Down yonder is the way (*points*) ;
Farewell, farewell, I can no longer stay.

[*Exit SLASHER.*]

FOOL. Yes, Slasher, thou hadst better go,
Else the next time he'll pierce thee through.

[*ST. DAVID stands forth.*]

ST. DAVID. Of Taffy's Land I'm Patron Saint.
Oh yes, indeed, I'll you acquaint,
Of Ancient Britons I've a race
Dare meet a foeman face to face.
For Welshmen (*hear it once again ;*)
Were born before all other men.
I'll fear no man in fight or freaks,
Whilst Wales produces cheese and leeks.

[*Enter TURKISH KNIGHT.*]

TURKISH KNIGHT. Here comes I, the Turkish
Knight,
Come from the Turkish land to fight.
I'll take St. David for my foe,
And make him yield before I go ;

He brags to such a high degree,
 He thinks there was never a Knight but he.
 So draw thy sword, St. David, thou man of courage
 bold,
 If thy Welsh blood is hot, soon will I fetch it cold.

ST. DAVID. Where is the Turk that will before
 me stand?

I'll cut him down with my courageous hand.

TURKISH KNIGHT. Draw out thy sword and slay,
 Pull out thy purse and pay,
 For satisfaction I will have, before I go away.

[*They fight. THE TURKISH KNIGHT is wounded, and
 falls on one knee.*]

Quarter! quarter! good Christian, grace of thee I
 crave,

Oh, pardon me this night, and I will be thy slave.

ST. DAVID. I keep no slaves, thou Turkish
 Knight.

So rise thee up again, and try thy might.

[*They fight again. THE TURKISH KNIGHT is slain.*]

[*Exit TURKISH KNIGHT.*]

[*Enter ST. GEORGE.*]

ST. GEORGE. I am the chief of all these valiant
 knights,
 We'll spill our heart's blood for Old England's rights,

Old England's honour we will still maintain,
We'll fight for Old England once and again.

*[Flourishes his sword above his head and then lays it
over his right shoulder.]*

I challenge all my country's foes.

ST. PATRICK *[dealing with his sword in like manner,
and then taking the point of ST. GEORGE'S sword
with his left hand]*.

And I'll assist with mighty blows.

ST. ANDREW *[acting like the other]*.
And you shall find me ready too.

ST. DAVID *[the same]*.
And who but I so well as you.

FOOL *[imitates the Knights, and they close the circle
and go round]*.

While we are joined in heart and hand,
A gallant and courageous band,
If e'er a foe dares look awry,
We'll one and all poke out his eye.

[Enter SALADIN.]

SALADIN. Don't vaunt thus, my courageous knights,
For I, as you, have seen some sights
In Palestine, in days of yore.
'Gainst prowess strong I bravely bore

The sway, when all the world in arms
Shook Holy Land with war's alarms.
I for the crescent, you the cross,
Each mighty host oft won and lost.
I many a thousand men did slay,
And ate two hundred twice a day,
And now I come, a giant great,
Just waiting for another meat.

ST. GEORGE. Oh! Saladin! Art thou come with
sword in hand,
Against St. George and Christendom so rashly to
withstand?

SALADIN. Yes, yes, St. George, with thee I mean
to fight,
And with one blow, I'll let thee know
I am not the Turkish Knight.

ST. GEORGE. Ah, Saladin, St. George is in this
very room,
Thou'rt come this unlucky hour to seek thy fatal
doom.

[*Enter* LITTLE PAGE.]

LITTLE PAGE. Hold, hold, St. George, I pray thee
stand by,
I'll conquer him, or else I'll die;
Long with that Pagan champion will I engage,
Although I am but the Little Page.

ST. GEORGE. Fight on, my little page, and
conquer!

And don't thee be perplext,
For if thou discourage in the field,
Fight him will I next.

[*They fight. THE LITTLE PAGE falls.*]

SALADIN. Though but a little man, they were great
words he said.

ST. GEORGE. Ah! cruel monster. What havoc
hast thou made?
See where the lovely stripling all on the floor is laid.
A doctor! A doctor! Ten pounds for a doctor!

[*DAME DOLLY dances forward, bobbing as before.*]

DAME DOLLY. Here comes I, little Dame Dorothy,
Flap front, and good-morrow to ye;
My head is big, my body is small,
I'm the prettiest little jade of you all.
Call not the Doctor for to make him worse,
But give the boy into my hand to nurse.

[*To LITTLE PAGE.*] Rise up, my pretty page, and
come with me,
And by kindness and kitchen physic, I'll cure thee
without fee.

[*PAGE rises. Exeunt PAGE and DAME DOLLY.*]

[ST. GEORGE *and* SALADIN *fight. SALADIN is slain.*]

[*Enter* FATHER CHRISTMAS.]

ST. GEORGE. Carry away the dead, Father.

FATHER CHRISTMAS. Let's see whether he's dead
or no, first, Georgy.

Yes; I think he's dead enough, Georgy.

ST. GEORGE. Carry him away then, Father.

FATHER CHRISTMAS [*vainly tries to move the
GIANT'S body*].

Thou killed him; thou carry him away.

ST. GEORGE. If you can't carry him, call for
help.

FATHER CHRISTMAS [*to audience*].

Three or four of you great logger-headed fellows,
Come and carry him away.

[DOCTOR *and* FOOL *raise the GIANT by his arms.*
Exit GIANT.]

[*Enter* LITTLE MAN JACK.]

LITTLE MAN JACK. Here comes I, Little Man
Jack,

The Master of Giants;

If I could but conquer thee, St. George,

I'd bid the world defiance.

ST. GEORGE. And if thou beest Little Man Jack,
 the Master of all Giants,
 I'll take thee up on my back, and carry thee without
 violence.

[Lifts him over his shoulder.]

FOOL. Now brave St. George, he rules the roast ;
 Britons triumphant be the toast ;
 Let cheerful song and dance abound,
 Whene'er the Mummers' time comes round.

[All sing.]

Rule, Britannia ; Britannia rules the waves,
 Britons never, never, never will be slaves.

GRAND SWORD DANCE.

Cut 1 and cross.

Cut 2 and cross partner (which is R. and L.).

Same back again.

The two Knights at opposite corners R. H. Cut 1 and
 cross, and Cut 2 with opposite Knights.

Same back (which is Ladies' Chain).

Four sword-points up in the centre.

All go round—all Cut 6—and come to bridle-arm
protect, and round to places.

Repeat the first figure.

[*All go round, and then out, singing.*]

Allegro.



And a mumming we will go, will go, and a mumming we will go, With a



bright cock-ade in all our hats, We'll go with a gal-lant show.

[*Exeunt omnes.*]

GOD SAVE THE QUEEN,

HINTS FOR PRIVATE THEATRICALS.

HINTS FOR PRIVATE THEATRICALS.—I.

IN A LETTER FROM BURNT CORK TO ROUGE POT.

MY DEAR ROUGE POT,—You say that you all want to have “theatricals” these holidays, and beg me to give you some useful rules and hints to study before the Christmas Play comes out in the December Number of *Aunt Judy*.

I will do my best. But—to begin with—*do* you “all” want them? At least, do you all want them enough to keep in the same mind for ten days or a fortnight, to take a good deal of trouble, whether it is pleasant or not, and to give up some time and some of your own way, in order that the theatricals may be successful?

If you say Yes, we will proceed at once to the first—and perhaps the most important—point, on which you will have to display two of an actor’s greatest virtues—self-denial and good temper:—

THE STAGE-MANAGER.

If your numbers are limited, you may have to choose the one who knows most about theatricals, and he or she may have to act a leading part as well. But by rights *the stage-manager ought not to act*; especially as in juvenile theatricals he will probably be prompter, property-man, and scene-shifter into the bargain.

If your "company" consists of very young performers, an elder sister is probably the best stage-manager you could have. But *when once your stage-manager is chosen, all the actors must make up their minds to obey him implicitly*. They must take the parts he gives them, and about any point in dispute the stage-manager's decision must be final. It is quite likely that now and then he may be wrong. The leading gentleman may be more in the right, the leading lady may have another plan quite as good, or better; but as there would be "no end to it" if everybody's ideas had to be listened to and discussed, it is absolutely necessary that there should be one head, and one plan loyally supported by the rest.

Truism as it is, my dear Rouge Pot, I am bound to beg you never to forget that *everybody can't have everything* in this world, and that *everybody can't be everything* on the stage. What you (and I, and every other actor!) would really like, would be to choose the play, to act the best part, to wear the nicest dress,

to pick the people you want to act with, to have the rehearsal on those days, and that part of the day, when you do not happen to want to go out, or do something else, to have the power of making all the others do as you tell them, without the bother of hearing any grumbles, and to be well clapped and complimented at the conclusion of the performance. But as this very leading part could only be played by one person at the expense of all the rest, private theatricals—like so many other affairs of this life—must for everybody concerned be a compromise of pains and pleasures, of making strict rules and large allowances, of giving and taking, bearing and forbearing, learning to find one's own happiness in seeing other people happy, aiming at perfection with all one's might, and making the best of imperfection in the end.

At this point, I foresee that you will very naturally exclaim that you asked me for stage-directions, and that I am sending you a sermon. I am very sorry ; but the truth really is, that as the best of plays and the cleverest of actors will not ensure success, if the actors quarrel about the parts, and are unwilling to suppress themselves for the common good, one is obliged to set out with a good stock of philosophy as well as of "properties."

Now, in case it should strike you as "unfair" that any one of your party should have so much of

his own way as I have given to the stage-manager, you must let me say that no one has more need of philosophy than that all-powerful person.

The stage-manager will have his own way, but he will have nothing else.

He will certainly have "no peace" from the first cry of "Let us have some private theatricals" till the day when the performance ceases to be discussed. If there are ten actors, it is quite possible that ten different plays will be warmly recommended to him, and that, whichever he selects, he will choose it against the gloomy forebodings of nine members of his company. Nine actors will feel a natural disappointment at not having the best part, and as it is obviously impossible to fix rehearsals so as to be equally convenient for everybody, the stage-manager, whose duty it is to fix them, will be very fortunate if he suits the convenience of the majority. You will easily believe that it is his painful duty to insist upon regular attendance, and even to enforce it by fines or by expulsion from the part, if such stringent laws have been agreed to by the company beforehand. But at the end he will have to bear in mind that private theatricals are an amusement, not a business; that it is said to be a pity to "make a toil of a pleasure"; that "boys will be boys"; that "Christmas comes but once a year," and holidays not much oftener—and in a general way

to console himself for the absence of defaulters, with the proverbial philosophy of everyday life, and the more reliable panacea of resolute good temper.

He must (without a thought of self) do his best to give the right parts to the right people, and he must try to combine a proper "cast" with pleasing everybody—so far as that impossible task is possible!

He must not only be ready to meet his own difficulties with each separate actor, but he must be prepared to be confidant, if not umpire, in all the squabbles which the actors and actresses may have among themselves.

If the performance is a great success, the actors will have the credit of it, and will probably be receiving compliments amongst the audience whilst the stage-manager is blowing out the guttering footlights, or showing the youngest performer how to get the paint off his cheeks, without taking the skin off into the bargain. And if the performance is a failure, nine of the performers will have nine separate sets of proofs that it was due to the stage-manager's unfortunate selection of the piece, or mistaken judgment as to the characters.

He will, however, have the satisfaction (and when one has a head to plan and a heart in one's work, it *is* a satisfaction) of carrying through the thing in his own way, and sooner or later, and here and there, he

will find some people who know the difficulties of his position, and will give him ample credit and *kudos* if he keeps his company in good humour, and carries out his plans without a breakdown.

By this time, my dear Rouge Pot, you will see that the stage-manager, like all rulers, pays dearly for his power; but it is to be hoped that the difficulties inseparable from his office will not be wilfully increased by

THE ACTORS.

They are a touchy race at any time. Amateur actors are said to have—one and all—a belief that each and every one can play any part of any kind. Shakespeare found that some of them thought they could play *every* part also! But besides this general error, each actor has his own peculiarities, which the stage-manager ought to acquaint himself with as soon as possible.

It is a painful fact that there are some people who “come forward” readily, do not seem at all nervous, are willing to play anything, and are either well provided with anecdotes of previous successes, or quite amazingly ready for leading parts, though they “never tried acting,” and are only “quite sure they shall like it”—but who, when the time comes, fail completely. I fear that there is absolutely nothing to be done with

such actors, but to avoid them for the future. On the other hand, there are many people who are nervous and awkward at first, and even more or less so through every rehearsal, but who *do not fail at the pinch*. Once fairly in their clothes, and pledged to their parts, they forget themselves in the sense of what they have undertaken, and their courage is stimulated by the crisis. Their knees may shake, but their minds see no alternative but to do their best, and the best, with characters of this conscientious type, is seldom bad.

It is quite true, also, that some actors are never at their best till they are dressed, and that some others can put off learning their parts till the last moment, and then "study" them at a push, and acquit themselves creditably in the play. *But these peculiarities are no excuse for neglecting rehearsals, or for not learning parts, or for rehearsing in a slovenly manner.*

Actors should never forget that rehearsals are not only for the benefit of each actor individually, but also of all the characters of the piece as a whole.

A. and B. may be able to learn their parts in a day, and to act fairly under the inspiration of the moment, but if they neglect rehearsals on this account, they deal very selfishly by C. and D., who have not the same facility, and who rehearse at great disadvantage if the other parts are not properly represented too.

And now a word or two to the actors of the small

parts. It *is* a disappointment to find yourself "cast" for a footman, with no more to do than to announce and usher in the principal personages of the piece, when you feel a strong (and perhaps well-grounded) conviction that you would have "made a hit" as the Prince in blank verse and blue velvet. Well! one must fall back on one's principles. Be loyal to the stage-manager. Help the piece through, whether it is or is not a pleasure and a triumph for you yourself. Set an example of willingness and good-humour. If to these first principles you add the amiable quality of finding pleasure in the happiness of others, you will be partly consoled for not playing the Prince yourself by sympathizing with Jack's unfeigned pride in his part and his finery, and if Jack has a heart under his velvet doublet, he will not forget your generosity. It may also be laid down as an axiom that *a good actor will take a pride in making the most of a small part.* There are many plays in which small parts have been raised to the rank of principal ones by the spirit put into them by a good actor, who "made" his part instead of grumbling at it. And the credit gained by a triumph of this kind is very often even beyond the actor's deserts. *From those who play the principal parts much is expected, and it is difficult to satisfy one's audience, but if any secondary character is made pathetic or amusing, the audience (having expected nothing) are*

willing to believe that if the actor can surprise them with a small part, he would take the house by storm with a big one.

I will conclude my letter with a few general rules for young actors.

Say nothing whatever on the stage but your part. This is a rule for rehearsals, and if it could be attended to, every rehearsal would have more than double its usual effect. People chatter from nervousness, explain or apologize for their mistakes, and waste quite three-fourths of the time in words which are not in the piece.

Speak very slowly and very clearly. All young actors speak too fast, and do not allow the audience time to digest each sentence. *Speak louder than usual, but clearness of enunciation is even more important.* *Do not be slovenly with the muscles of the lips, or talk from behind shut teeth.*

Keep your face to the audience as a rule.

If two people talking together have to cross each other so as to change their places on the stage, *the one who has just spoken should cross before the one who is going to speak.*

Learn to stand still.

As a rule, *do not speak when you are crossing the stage, but cross first and then speak.*

Let the last speaker get his sentence well out before you begin yours.

If you are a comic actor, *don't run away with the piece by over-doing your fun. Never spoil another actor's points by trying to make the audience laugh whilst he is speaking.* It is inexcusably bad stage-manners.

If the audience applauds, *wait till the noise of the clapping is over to finish your speech.*

Rehearse without your book in the last rehearsals, so as to get into the way of hearing the prompter, and catching the word from him when your memory fails you.

Practise your part before a looking-glass, and say it out aloud. A part may be pat in your head, and very stiff on your tongue.

The Green-room is generally a scene of great confusion in private theatricals. Besides getting everything belonging to your dress together *yourself* and in *good time*, I advise you to have *a little hand-basket*, such as you may have used at the seaside or in the garden, and into this to put *pins, hair-pins, a burnt cork, needles and thread, a pair of scissors, a pencil, your part, and any small things you may require.* It is easy to drop them into the basket again. Small things get mislaid under bigger ones when one is dressing in a hurry; and a hero who is flustered by his moustache having fallen under the washstand well out of sight is apt to forget his part when he has found the moustache.

Remember that *Right and Left in stage directions mean the right and left hand of the actor as he faces the audience.*

I will not burden you with any further advice for yourself, and I will reserve a few hints as to rough and ready scenery, properties, &c., for another letter.

Meanwhile—whatever else you omit—get your parts well by rote ; and if you cannot find or spare a stage-manager, you must find good-humour and common agreement in proportion ; prompt by turns, and each look strictly after his own “properties.”

Yours, &c.,

BURNT CORK.

HINTS FOR PRIVATE THEATRICALS.—II.

MY DEAR ROUGE POT,—I promised to say a few words about *rough and ready properties*.

The most indispensable of all is *the curtain*, which can be made (at small expense) to roll up and come down in orthodox fashion. Even better are two curtains, with the rings and strings so arranged that the curtains can be pulled apart or together by some one in the wings. Any upholsterer will do this. A double drawing-room with folding doors is of course “made for theatricals.” The difficulty of having only one exit from the stage—the door of the room—may be met by having a screen on the other side. But then *the actors who go out behind the screen, must be those who will not have to come in again till the curtain has been drawn.*

If, however, the room, or part of a room, devoted to the stage is large enough for an amateur proscenium, with “wings” at the sides, and space behind the

“scenes” to conceal the actors, and enable them to go round, of course there can be as many exits as are needed.

A proscenium is quite a possibility. *The framework in which the curtain falls need not be an expensive or complicated concern.* Two wooden uprights, firmly fastened to the floor by bolt and socket, each upright being four or five feet from the wall on either side; a cross-bar resting on the top, but the whole width of the room, to which (if it draws up) the curtain is to be nailed; a curtain, with a wooden pole in the hem at the bottom to steady it (like a window-blind); long, narrow, fixed curtains to fall from the cross-bar at each end where it projects beyond the uprights, so as to fill the space between each upright and the wall of the room, and hide the wings; some bright wall-paper border to fasten on to the uprights and cross-bar, as decoration;—these are not expensive matters, and the little carpentry needed could be done in a very short time by a village carpenter.

And here, my dear Rouge Pot, I feel inclined to say a word to “Parents and Guardians.” *I wish that a small annual outlay on little pleasures were oftener reckoned among legitimate expenses in middle-class British families.* But little pleasures and alms are apt to be left till they are asked for, and then grudged. Though, if the annual expenses under these two heads

were summed up at the end of the year, we should perhaps be more inclined to blush than to bewail our extravagances. As to little pleasures, I am not speaking of toys and books and presents, of which children have commonly six times as many now-a-days as they can learn to love; nor do I mean such pleasures as the month at the sea-side, which I should be sorry to describe as a light matter for papa's purse. But I mean little pleasures of the children's own devising, for which some trifling help from the elders will make all the difference between failure and success. In short, my dear Rouge Pot, at the present moment I mean the children's theatricals; and papa himself will confess that, whereas two or three pounds, "up or down," in the seaside move, would hardly be considered, and fifteen shillings "more or less" in the price of a new dining-room fender would upset nobody's nerves in the household—if "the children" asked for a day's work of the village carpenter, and seven and sixpence worth of wood, to carry out a project of their own, it would be considered a great waste of money. However, it is only fair to add that the young people themselves will do wisely to establish a "theatrical fund" box, which will not open, and to put in a fixed percentage of everybody's pocket-money to accumulate for some genuine properties when the theatrical season begins.

The question of *scenery* of course must depend on the resources of the company. But *acting may be very successful without any at all*. It must never be forgotten that *those who look and listen can also imagine*, and unless tolerably good scenes can be had, it is almost better to content oneself with what served in the days of Shakespeare—a written placard of what the scene is supposed to be. *Shakespeare scenery*, as we may call it, will amuse people of itself, and a good piece and good actors will not suffer from its use. Thus, if *The Barmecide* is being played, Alnaschan and Ina will be “discovered” standing in an empty room, at the back of which a placard will bear this inscription in large letters—A STREET IN BAGDAD.

It is possible, however, that your company may include some water-colour artist, who will try his or her hand at scene-painting in the barn. Well: he will want canvas or unbleached calico, which must be covered completely with a “first wash” of whitening and size, mixed to a freely working consistency, and laid on with a white-wash brush. When dry, he must outline his scene on this in charcoal. The painting is then to be done in distemper—all the effects are put in by the first wash; lights and shadows in their full tone, &c. He will use powder paints, mix them with size (which must be kept warm on a fire), and add white for body-colour when he wants to lay one

colour over another. I will add four hints. *For a small stage avoid scenes with extreme perspective. Keep the general colouring rather sober, so as to harmonize with the actors' dresses. Only broad effects will show. Keep stepping back to judge your work from a distance.* In a wood, for instance, the distance may be largely blue and grey, and the foreground trees a good deal in warm browns and dull olive. *Paint by candle-light when convenient.*

All the lights in your theatre must be protected by glasses. The footlights should have reflectors behind them, or a board about eighteen inches high with block-tin nailed on it. Failing this, a plain polished fender, in which candles or lamps can be placed, will serve. There must also be sidelights, or the footlights will cast shadows. Long strips of coloured glass, in frames, can lie flat in front of the stage when not in use, and be raised up when wanted, between the footlights and the stage—blue for moonlight, yellow for sunshine, rose-colour for sunset scenes and fairy effects. A shade may be quickly thrown up between the footlights and the stage, on the same principle, if darkness is required. For thunder, shake a thin sheet of iron behind the scenes. Powdered resin or lycopodium thrown on to the flame of a candle from a quill is said to be effective as lightning. But any tricks with naked lights, in the confusion of private theatricals, are

objectionable, and should never be used except by some grown-up person not among the actors. *For rain, shake parched peas in a box with irregular partitions. For a full moon, cut a round hole in your scene, cover it with some translucent material, and hold a lamp behind it; the blue-glass shade must be up before the footlights. A similar hole, or, if low on the horizon, a half-moon-shaped one, with a crimson transparency, will do for a setting sun—then the rose-coloured glass will be required before the footlights.*

I have no further space just now, my dear Rouge Pot; but you may expect another letter from me on Scenery Screens, Properties and Costumes.

Yours, &c.,

BURNT CORK.



HINTS FOR PRIVATE THEATRICALS.—III.

MY DEAR ROUGE POT,—I promised to say something about *scenery screens*.

If the house happens to boast a modern pseudo-Japanese screen of a large size (say six feet high), it will make a very pretty background for a drawing-room scene, and admit of entrances as I suggested. But *screens with light grounds are also very valuable as reflectors*, carrying the light into the back of the stage. There is generally a want of light on the amateur stage, and all means to remedy this defect and brighten up matters are worth considering.

Folding screens may be covered on both sides *with strips of lining wall-paper of delicate tints, pinned on with drawing-pins*. The paper can be left plain, or it may serve as the background on which to affix "Shakespeare Scenery." Or again, your amateur painter will find an easier and more effective reward

for such labour as he will not grudge to bestow in the holidays, if, instead of attempting the ambitious task of scene-painting on canvas, he adorns these scenery screens with Japanese designs in water-colours. Bold and not too crowded combinations of butterflies and flamingoes, tortoises, dragons, water-reeds, flowers and ferns. He need not hesitate to employ Bessemer's gold and silver paints, with discretion, and the two sides of the screen can be done in different ways. The Japanesque side would make a good drawing-room background, and some other scene (such as a wood) might be indicated on the other with a nearer approach to real scene-painting. *These screens light up beautifully, and are well adapted for drawing-room theatricals.*

In the common event of your requiring a bit of a cottage with a practicable door to be visible, it will be seen that two folds of a screen, painted with bricks and windows, may be made to do duty in no ill fashion as the two sides of a house, and with a movable porch (a valuable stage property) the entrance can be contrived just out of sight. *The stage will be brightened up by laying down a "crumb cloth," or covering it with holland.* A drawing-room scene is made very pretty by hanging up pairs of the summer white muslin curtains, looped with gay ribbons, as if there were windows in the sides of the stage.

If a fire-place is wanted and will do at the side, a mantelpiece is easily represented, and a banner screen will help to conceal the absence of a grate. A showy specimen of that dreadful thing, a paper grate-ornament, flowing well down into the fender, may sometimes hide deficiencies. The appearance of *hot coals in a practicable grate* is given by *irregularly-shaped pieces of red glass, through which light is thrown from a candle behind.*

A very important part of your preparations will be *the dresses.*

Now of dresses it may be said—as we have said of scenery—that if the actors are clever, very slight (if suggestive) accessories in the way of costume will suffice. At the same time, whilst the scenery can never be good enough in amateur theatricals to cover deficiencies in the performance, good costumes may be a most material help to the success of a piece. Very little wit is demanded from the young gentleman who plays the part of a monkey, if his felt coat is well made, and his monkey-mask comical, and if he has acquired some dexterity in the management of his tail.

I think, my dear Rouge Pot, that you were taken to see that splendid exhibition of stage properties, *Babil and Bijou?* Do you remember the delightful effect of the tribe of oysters? The little boys who

played the oysters had nothing to do but to hop and run, and keep their shells nicely in front of them, and yet how we laughed at them! Now, in a large family, such parts as these afford an opportunity for allowing "the little ones" to "act," and so to become accustomed to the stage, before they can be trusted to learn written parts. Nor are *comical costumes* beyond the powers of home manufacturers.

You know those men—sandwich-men as they are often called!—who go about the London streets with one board in front and one behind. These boards are of simple shape and only reach from the shoulder to a little below the knee; they are only wanted to paste advertisements on. But if you think about it, you will see that to have the boards high enough to hide the head, and low enough to hide the legs, rounded at the top like a scallop shell, with the ribs of the shell nicely painted, eyeholes to peep through, and the hinge of the shell arranged to conceal the feet, would be no very great effort of skill. *Sandwich costumes for the little ones* might be of many effective shapes. Thick paste-board would probably be strong enough for very little people, and in many cases a covered framework would be better still, and if you have a kite-maker in your troupe, you had better commit these costumes to his skill and ingenuity. A very simple device would be that of flower-pots

painted red. They need come no higher than the chin, if a good thick bush is firmly held by the little hands behind, so as to conceal the face. But no doubt, my dear Rouge Pot, you will say, "if we have no plays with such characters in, we cannot have them, however desirable it may be to bring in the little ones." But I think you will find some of the elders ingenious enough to "tack them on" to your pieces if required, especially to those founded on fairy tales.

Glazed calico is the amateur costume-maker's best friend. It is cheap, it is shiny, and it can be had in all the most effective colours. I have never seen a very good green; but the turquoise blue, the pink, and the yellow, are of those pretty Dresden china shades which Mr. Marcus Ward and other Christmas-card makers use to such good purpose against gold backgrounds. Many of these Christmas cards, by the bye, with children dressed in ancient costumes painted by good artists, will give you and your sisters help in a tasteful combination of colours; and besides the gold and silver powder paints, which answer admirably, gold and silver paper can be had to cut stars and trimmings of various sorts from, to stitch or gum on to fairies' dresses, &c.

Tarlatan can now be had in hues that almost rival the colours of flowers, but I fear that only the white

can be had "fire-proof." Gauze wings, flowing hair, and tarlatan skirts, combined with the "flurry" of the performances, the confined space behind the scenes, and lights everywhere, form a dangerous combination which it makes one shudder to think of. The truth is, my dear Rouge Pot, it cannot be too often or too emphatically repeated that *naked lights on the stage or behind the scenes in amateur theatricals are as wrong as in a coal-mine.* Glass shades for the bedroom candles—with which boy-brothers, seeing imperfectly through masks, will rush past little sisters whose newly-crimped hair and tarlatan skirts are sticking out, they can't feel how far behind them—cost a few shillings, *and the mental effort of resolving to have and use them.* Depend upon it, Rouge Pot, the latter is the greater difficulty! And yet our petty economies in matters which affect our health, our daily comfort, or our lives, are wonderful, when the dangers or discomforts we have to avert may, *by chance,* be averted by good luck at no cost at all. So perhaps the few shillings have something to do with it. I hope they will always be expended on safety glasses for all lights in use on or about your stage.

Well, glazed calico and tarlatan are very effective, and so is cotton velvet or velveteen; but in every family there will probably be found a few articles of finery originally made of expensive materials, but

which are now yielded to the juvenile property-box, and from experience I can assure you that these are valuable treasures. I have a tender remembrance of a few which were our *pièces de résistance* when we “dressed up” either for charades or one of Miss Corner’s plays—“in my young days.” A black satin dress—ancient, but of such lustre and softness as satins are not made now ; a real camel’s-hair burnous, dyed crimson ; a green satin driving cloak, lined with fur—these things did not crush and tumble during their long periods of repose in the property-box, as tarlatan skirts and calico doublets were apt to do. Most valuable of all, a grey wig, worn right side foremost by our elderly gentlemen, and wrong side foremost (so as to bring the pig-tail curls over the forehead) by our elderly ladies. Fur gloves, which, with a black rabbit-skin mask over her rosy cheeks, gave ferocity in the part of “the Beast” to our jolliest little actress. A pair of claret-coloured stockings, silk throughout, and a pair of yellow leather slippers, embroidered with gold, doubtless bought long years back in some Eastern bazaar, &c., &c. There came a date in our theatrical history when only one pair of feet could get right into these much-desired shoes, heels and all ; and as the individual who owned them was also supposed to display the claret-coloured stockings to the best advantage, both these important properties, with

the part of Prince to which our custom assigned them, fell to an actor who could lay no other claim to pre-eminence.

Surely your home will provide one or two of these "stand-bys" of the green-room, and you will not fail to value them, I assure you. I hope you will not fight for them!

Wigs are very important. Unbleached calico is a very fair imitation of the skin of one's head. A skull-cap made of it will do for a bald pate, or, with a black pigtail and judicious face-painting, will turn any smooth-faced actor into a very passable Chinaman. Flowing locks of tow, stitched on round the lower part, will convert it into a patriarchal wig. *Nigger wigs are made of curly black horsehair fastened on to a black skull-cap.* Moustaches and whiskers can be bought at small expense, but if well painted the effect is nearly as good.

As to *face-painting*. Rouge is indispensable, but care must be taken not to overdo it. The eyebrows must be darkened with sepia or Indian ink, and a camel's-hair brush—especially for fair people. With the same materials you must deepen all the lines of the face, if you want to make a young person look like an old one. The cheek lines on each side of the nose, furrows across the forehead, and crow's-foot marks by the eyes, are required for an old face; but

if the audience are to be very close to the stage, you must be careful not to overdo your painting. Violet powder is the simplest and least irritating white for the skin. Rouge should be laid on with a hare's foot. If your "old man" is wearing a bald wig, be careful to colour his forehead to match as well as possible with his bald pate. All these applications are more or less irritating to one's skin. It is said to be a mistake to *wash* them off. Cold cream should be rubbed over the face, and then wiped off with a soft towel.

As a parting hint, my dear Rouge Pot, when you have passed the stage of child-plays in rhyme—but do not be in a *hurry* to discard such universal favourites as *Dick Whittington*, *Beauty and the Beast*, and *Cinderella*—don't be too ambitious in your selection from "grown-up" plays. As a matter of experience, when *we* got beyond Miss Corner we took to farces, and found them very successful. There are many which play well in young hands, and only require the omission of a few coarse expressions, which, being intended to raise a laugh among "roughs" in the gallery of a public theatre, need hardly be hurled at the ears of one's private friends.

I am bound to say that competent critics have told me that farces were about the most difficult things we could have attempted. I can only say that we found them answer. Partly, perhaps, because it

requires a less high skill to raise a laugh than to move by passion or pathos. Partly, too, because farces are short, and amateurs can make no greater mistake than to weary their audience.

If you prefer "dress pieces" and dramas to farces or burlesque, let some competent person curtail the one you choose to a suitable length.

The manager of juvenile theatricals should never forget the wisdom embodied in Sam Weller's definition of the art of letter-writing, that the writer should stop short at such a point as that the reader should "wish there was more of it."

Yours, &c.,
BURNT CORK.

SNAP-DRAGONS.

SNAP-DRAGONS.

A TALE OF CHRISTMAS EVE.

MR. AND MRS. SKRATDJ.

ONCE upon a time there lived a certain family of the name of Skratdj. (It has a Russian or Polish look, and yet they most certainly lived in England.) They were remarkable for the following peculiarity. They seldom seriously quarrelled, but they never agreed about anything. It is hard to say whether it were more painful for their friends to hear them constantly contradicting each other, or gratifying to discover that it "meant nothing," and was "only their way."

It began with the father and mother. They were a worthy couple, and really attached to each other. But they had a habit of contradicting each other's statements, and opposing each other's opinions, which, though mutually understood and allowed for in private, was most trying to the bystanders in public.

If one related an anecdote, the other would break in with half-a-dozen corrections of trivial details of no interest or importance to any one, the speakers included. For instance : Suppose the two dining in a strange house, and Mrs. Skratdj seated by the host, and contributing to the small-talk of the dinner-table. Thus :—

“Oh yes. Very changeable weather indeed. It looked quite promising yesterday morning in the town, but it began to rain at noon.”

“A quarter-past eleven, my dear,” Mr. Skratdj’s voice would be heard to say from several chairs down, in the corrective tones of a husband and a father ; “and really, my dear, so far from being a promising morning, I must say it looked about as threatening as it well could. Your memory is not always accurate in small matters, my love.”

But Mrs. Skratdj had not been a wife and a mother for fifteen years, to be snuffed out at one snap of the marital snuffers. As Mr. Skratdj leaned forward in his chair, she leaned forward in hers, and defended herself across the intervening couples.

“Why, my dear Mr. Skratdj, you said yourself the weather had not been so promising for a week.”

“What I said, my dear, pardon me, was that the barometer was higher than it had been for a week. But, as you might have observed if these details were

in your line, my love, which they are not, the rise was extraordinarily rapid, and there is no surer sign of unsettled weather.—But Mrs. Skratdj is apt to forget these unimportant trifles,” he added, with a comprehensive smile round the dinner-table ; “her thoughts are very properly absorbed by the more important domestic questions of the nursery.”

“Now I think that’s rather unfair on Mr. Skratdj’s part,” Mrs. Skratdj would chirp, with a smile quite as affable and as general as her husband’s. “I’m sure he’s *quite* as forgetful and inaccurate as *I* am. And I don’t think *my* memory is at *all* a bad one.”

“You forgot the dinner hour when we were going out to dine last week, nevertheless,” said Mr. Skratdj.

“And you couldn’t help me when I asked you,” was the sprightly retort. “And I’m sure it’s not like you to forget anything about *dinner*, my dear.”

“The letter was addressed to you,” said Mr. Skratdj.

“I sent it to you by Jemima,” said Mrs. Skratdj.

“I didn’t read it,” said Mr. Skratdj.

“Well, you burnt it,” said Mrs. Skratdj ; “and, as I always say, there’s nothing more foolish than burning a letter of invitation before the day, for one is certain to forget.”

“I’ve no doubt you always do say it,” Mr. Skratdj remarked, with a smile, “but I certainly never

remember to have heard the observation from your lips, my love."

"Whose memory's in fault there?" asked Mrs. Skratdj triumphantly; and as at this point the ladies rose, Mrs. Skratdj had the last word.

Indeed, as may be gathered from this conversation, Mrs. Skratdj was quite able to defend herself. When she was yet a bride, and young and timid, she used to collapse when Mr. Skratdj contradicted her statements and set her stories straight in public. Then she hardly ever opened her lips without disappearing under the domestic extinguisher. But in the course of fifteen years she had learned that Mr. Skratdj's bark was a great deal worse than his bite. (If, indeed, he had a bite at all.) Thus snubs that made other people's ears tingle, had no effect whatever on the lady to whom they were addressed, for she knew exactly what they were worth, and had by this time become fairly adept at snapping in return. In the days when she succumbed she was occasionally unhappy, but now she and her husband understood each other, and having agreed to differ, they unfortunately agreed also to differ in public.

Indeed, it was the bystanders who had the worst of it on these occasions. To the worthy couple themselves the habit had become second nature, and in no way affected the friendly tenour of their domestic rela-

tions. They would interfere with each other's conversation, contradicting assertions, and disputing conclusions for a whole evening; and then, when all the world and his wife thought that these ceaseless sparks of bickering must blaze up into a flaming quarrel as soon as they were alone, they would bowl amicably home in a cab, criticizing the friends who were commenting upon them, and as little agreed about the events of the evening as about the details of any other events whatever.

Yes, the bystanders certainly had the worst of it. Those who were near wished themselves anywhere else, especially when appealed to. Those who were at a distance did not mind so much. A domestic squabble at a certain distance is interesting, like an engagement viewed from a point beyond the range of guns. In such a position one may some day be placed oneself! Moreover, it gives a touch of excitement to a dull evening to be able to say *sotto voce* to one's neighbour, "Do listen! The Skratdjs are at it again!" Their unmarried friends thought a terrible abyss of tyranny and aggravation must lie beneath it all, and blessed their stars that they were still single, and able to tell a tale their own way. The married ones had more idea of how it really was, and wished in the name of common sense and good taste that Skratdj and his wife would not make fools of themselves.

So it went on, however ; and so, I suppose, it goes on still, for not many bad habits are cured in middle age.

On certain questions of comparative speaking their views were never identical. Such as the temperature being hot or cold, things being light or dark, the apple-tarts being sweet or sour. So one day Mr. Skratdj came into the room, rubbing his hands, and planting himself at the fire with " Bitterly cold it is to-day, to be sure."

" Why, my dear William," said Mrs. Skratdj, " I'm sure you must have got a cold ; I feel a fire quite oppressive myself."

" You were wishing you'd a seal-skin jacket yesterday, when it wasn't half as cold as it is to-day," said Mr. Skratdj.

" My dear William ! Why, the children were shivering the whole day, and the wind was in the north."

" Due east, Mrs. Skratdj."

" I know by the smoke," said Mrs. Skratdj, softly but decidedly.

" I fancy I can tell an east wind when I feel it," said Mr. Skratdj, jocosely, to the company.

" I told Jemima to look at the weathercock," murmured Mrs. Skratdj.

" I don't care a fig for Jemima," said her husband.

On another occasion Mrs. Skratdj and a lady friend were conversing.

. . . "We met him at the Smiths'—a gentleman-like agreeable man, about forty," said Mrs. Skratdj, in reference to some matter interesting to both ladies.

"Not a day over thirty-five," said Mr. Skratdj, from behind his newspaper.

"Why, my dear William, his hair's grey," said Mrs. Skratdj.

"Plenty of men are grey at thirty," said Mr. Skratdj. "I knew a man who was grey at twenty-five."

"Well, forty or thirty-five, it doesn't much matter," said Mrs. Skratdj, about to resume her narration.

"Five years matter a good deal to most people at thirty-five," said Mr. Skratdj, as he walked towards the door. "They would make a remarkable difference to me, I know;" and with a jocular air Mr. Skratdj departed, and Mrs. Skratdj had the rest of the anecdote her own way.

THE LITTLE SKRATDJS.

The Spirit of Contradiction finds a place in most nurseries, though to a varying degree in different ones. Children snap and snarl by nature, like young puppies;

and most of us can remember taking part in some such spirited dialogues as the following :—

{ “I will.”	{ “You daren’t.”
{ “You can’t.”	{ “I dare.”
{ “You shall.”	{ “I’ll tell Mamma.”
{ “I won’t.”	{ “I don’t care if you do.”

It is the part of wise parents to repress these squibs and crackers of juvenile contention, and to enforce that slowly-learned lesson, that in this world one must often “pass over” and “put up with” things in other people, being oneself by no means perfect. Also that it is a kindness, and almost a duty, to let people think and say and do things in their own way occasionally.

But even if Mr. and Mrs. Skratdj had ever thought of teaching all this to their children, it must be confessed that the lesson would not have come with a good grace from either of them, since they snapped and snarled between themselves as much or more than their children in the nursery.

The two eldest were the leaders in the nursery squabbles. Between these, a boy and a girl, a ceaseless war of words was waged from morning to night. And as neither of them lacked ready wit, and both were in constant practice, the art of snapping was cultivated by them to the highest pitch.

It began at breakfast, if not sooner.

“You’ve taken my chair.”

“It’s not your chair.”

“You know it’s the one I like, and it was in my place.”

“How do you know it was in your place?”

“Never mind. I do know.”

“No, you don’t.”

“Yes, I do.”

“Suppose I say it was in my place.”

“You can’t, for it wasn’t.”

“I can, if I like.”

“Well, was it?”

“I sha’n’t tell you.”

“Ah! that shows it wasn’t.”

“No, it doesn’t.”

“Yes, it does.”

Etc., etc., etc.

The direction of their daily walks was a fruitful subject of difference of opinion.

“Let’s go on the Common to-day, Nurse.”

“Oh, don’t let’s go there; we’re always going on the Common.”

“I’m sure we’re not. We’ve not been there for ever so long.”

“Oh, what a story! We were there on Wednesday. Let’s go down Gipsev Lane. We never go down Gipsev Lane.”

"Why, we're always going down Gipsej Lane. And there's nothing to see there."

"I don't care. I won't go on the Common, and I shall go and get Papa to say we're to go down Gipsej Lane. I can run faster than you."

"That's very sneaking; but I don't care."

"Papa! Papa! Polly's called me a sneak."

"No, I didn't, Papa."

"You did."

"No, I didn't. I only said it was sneaking of you to say you'd run faster than me, and get Papa to say we were to go down Gipsej Lane."

"Then you did call him sneaking," said Mr. Skratdj. "And you're a very naughty ill-mannered little girl. You're getting very troublesome, Polly, and I shall have to send you to school, where you'll be kept in order. Go where your brother wishes at once."

For Polly and her brother had reached an age when it was convenient, if possible, to throw the blame of all nursery differences on Polly. In families where domestic discipline is rather fractious than firm, there comes a stage when the girls almost invariably go to the wall, because they will stand snubbing, and the boys will not. Domestic authority, like some other powers, is apt to be magnified on the weaker class.

But Mr. Skratdj would not always listen even to Harry.

“If you don’t give it me back directly, I’ll tell about your eating the two magnum-bonums in the kitchen garden on Sunday,” said Master Harry on one occasion.

“Tell-tale tit!
Your tongue shall be slit,
And every dog in the town shall have a little bit,”

quoted his sister.

“Ah! You’ve called me a tell-tale. Now I’ll go and tell Papa. You got into a fine scrape for calling me names the other day.”

“Go, then! I don’t care.”

“You wouldn’t like me to go, I know.”

“You daren’t. That’s what it is.”

“I dare.”

“Then why don’t you?”

“Oh, I am going; but you’ll see what will be the end of it.”

Polly, however, had her own reasons for remaining stolid, and Harry started. But when he reached the landing he paused. Mr. Skratdj had especially announced that morning that he did not wish to be disturbed, and though he was a favourite, Harry had no desire to invade the dining-room at this crisis. So he returned to the nursery, and said with a

magnanimous air, "I don't want to get you into a scrape, Polly. If you'll beg my pardon I won't go."

"I'm sure I sha'n't," said Polly, who was equally well informed as to the position of affairs at headquarters. "Go, if you dare."

"I won't if you want me not," said Harry, discreetly waiving the question of apologies.

"But I'd rather you went," said the obdurate Polly. "You're always telling tales. Go and tell now, if you're not afraid."

So Harry went. But at the bottom of the stairs he lingered again, and was meditating how to return with most credit to his dignity, when Polly's face appeared through the banisters, and Polly's sharp tongue goaded him on.

"Ah! I see you. You're stopping. You daren't go."

"I dare," said Harry; and at last he went.

As he turned the handle of the door, Mr. Skratdj turned round.

"Please, Papa——" Harry began.

"Get away with you!" cried Mr. Skratdj. "Didn't I tell you I was not to be disturbed this morning? What an extraor——"

But Harry had shut the door, and withdrawn precipitately.

Once outside, he returned to the nursery with

dignified steps, and an air of apparent satisfaction, saying,

“ You’re to give me the bricks, please.”

“ Who says so ? ”

“ Why, who should say so ? Where have I been, pray ? ”

“ I don’t know, and I don’t care.”

“ I’ve been to Papa. There ! ”

“ Did he say I was to give up the bricks ? ”

“ I’ve told you.”

“ No, you’ve not.”

“ I sha’n’t tell you any more.”

“ Then I’ll go to Papa and ask.”

“ Go by all means.”

“ I won’t if you’ll tell me truly.”

“ I sha’n’t tell you anything. Go and ask, if you dare,” said Harry, only too glad to have the tables turned.

Polly’s expedition met with the same fate, and she attempted to cover her retreat in a similar manner.

“ Ah ! you didn’t tell.”

“ I don’t believe you asked Papa.”

“ Don’t you ? Very well ! ”

“ Well, did you ? ”

“ Never mind.”

Etc., etc., etc.

Meanwhile Mr. Skratdj scolded Mrs. Skratdj for

not keeping the children in better order. And Mrs. Skratdj said it was quite impossible to do so, when Mr. Skratdj spoiled Harry as he did, and weakened her (Mrs. Skratdj's) authority by constant interference.

Difference of sex gave point to many of these nursery squabbles, as it so often does to domestic broils.

"Boys never will do what they're asked," Polly would complain.

"Girls ask such unreasonable things," was Harry's retort.

"Not half so unreasonable as the things you ask."

"Ah! that's a different thing! Women have got to do what men tell them, whether it's reasonable or not."

"No, they've not!" said Polly. "At least, that's only husbands and wives."

"All women are inferior animals," said Harry.

"Try ordering Mamma to do what you want, and see!" said Polly.

"Men have got to give orders, and women have to obey," said Harry, falling back on the general principle. "And when I get a wife, I'll take care I make her do what I tell her. But you'll have to obey your husband when you get one."

"I won't have a husband, and then I can do as I like."

“Oh, won't you? You'll try to get one, I know. Girls always want to be married.”

“I'm sure I don't know why,” said Polly; “they must have had enough of men if they have brothers.”

And so they went on, *ad infinitum*, with ceaseless arguments that proved nothing and convinced nobody, and a continual stream of contradiction that just fell short of downright quarrelling.

Indeed, there was a kind of snapping even less near to a dispute than in the cases just mentioned. The little Skratdjs, like some other children, were under the unfortunate delusion that it sounds clever to hear little boys and girls snap each other up with smart sayings, and old and rather vulgar play upon words, such as :

“I'll give you a Christmas-box. Which ear will you have it on?”

“I won't stand it.”

“Pray take a chair.”

“You shall have it to-morrow.”

“To-morrow never comes.”

And so if a visitor kindly began to talk to one of the children, another was sure to draw near and “take up” all the first child's answers, with smart comments, and catches that sounded as silly as they were tiresome and impertinent.

And ill-mannered as this was, Mr. and Mrs.

Skratdj never put a stop to it. Indeed, it was only a caricature of what they did themselves. But they often said, "We can't think how it is the children are always squabbling!"

THE SKRATDJS' DOG AND THE HOT-TEMPERED
GENTLEMAN.

It is wonderful how the state of mind of a whole household is influenced by the heads of it. Mr. Skratdj was a very kind master, and Mrs. Skratdj was a very kind mistress, and yet their servants lived in a perpetual fever of irritability that just fell short of discontent. They jostled each other on the back stairs, said sharp things in the pantry, and kept up a perennial warfare on the subject of the duty of the sexes with the general man-servant. They gave warning on the slightest provocation.

The very dog was infected by the snapping mania. He was not a brave dog, he was not a vicious dog, and no high-breeding sanctioned his pretensions to arrogance. But like his owners, he had contracted a bad habit, a trick, which made him the pest of all timid visitors, and indeed of all visitors whatsoever.

The moment any one approached the house, on certain occasions when he was spoken to, and often in no traceable connection with any cause at all, Snap

the mongrel would rush out, and bark in his little sharp voice—"Yap! yap! yap!" If the visitor made a stand, he would bound away sideways on his four little legs; but the moment the visitor went on his way again, Snap was at his heels—"Yap! yap! yap!" He barked at the milkman, the butcher's boy, and the baker, though he saw them every day. He never got used to the washerwoman, and she never got used to him. She said he "put her in mind of that there black dog in the *Pilgrim's Progress*." He sat at the gate in summer, and yapped at every vehicle and every pedestrian who ventured to pass on the high-road. He never but once had the chance of barking at burglars; and then, though he barked long and loud, nobody got up, for they said, "It's only Snap's way." The Skratdjs lost a silver teapot, a Stilton cheese, and two electro christening mugs, on this occasion; and Mr. and Mrs. Skratdj dispute who it was who discouraged reliance on Snap's warning to the present day.

One Christmas time, a certain hot-tempered gentleman came to visit the Skratdjs. A tall, sandy, energetic young man, who carried his own bag from the railway. The bag had been crammed rather than packed, after the wont of bachelors; and you could see where the heel of a boot distended the leather, and where the bottle of shaving-cream lay.

As he came up to the house, out came Snap as usual—"Yap! yap! yap!" Now the gentleman was very fond of dogs, and had borne this greeting some dozen of times from Snap, who for his part knew the visitor quite as well as the washerwoman, and rather better than the butcher's boy. The gentleman had good, sensible, well-behaved dogs of his own, and was greatly disgusted with Snap's conduct. Nevertheless he spoke friendly to him; and Snap, who had had many a bit from his plate, could not help stopping for a minute to lick his hand. But no sooner did the gentleman proceed on his way, than Snap flew at his heels in the usual fashion—

"Yap! Yap! Yap!"

On which the gentleman—being hot-tempered, and one of those people with whom it is (as they say) a word and a blow, and the blow first—made a dash at Snap, and Snap taking to his heels, the gentleman flung his carpet-bag after him. The bottle of shaving-cream hit upon a stone and was smashed. The heel of the boot caught Snap on the back, and sent him squealing to the kitchen. And he never barked at that gentleman again.

If the gentleman disapproved of Snap's conduct, he still less liked the continual snapping of the Skratdj family themselves. He was an old friend of Mr. and Mrs. Skratdj, however, and knew that they

were really happy together, and that it was only a bad habit which made them constantly contradict each other. It was in allusion to their real affection for each other, and their perpetual disputing, that he called them the "Snapping Turtles."

When the war of words waxed hottest at the dinner-table between his host and hostess, he would drive his hands through his shock of sandy hair, and say, with a comical glance out of his umber eyes, "Don't flirt, my friends. It makes a bachelor feel awkward."

And neither Mr. nor Mrs. Skratdj could help laughing.

With the little Skratdjs his measures were more vigorous. He was very fond of children, and a good friend to them. He grudged no time or trouble to help them in their games and projects, but he would not tolerate their snapping up each other's words in his presence. He was much more truly kind than many visitors, who think it polite to smile at the sauciness and forwardness which ignorant vanity leads children so often to "show off" before strangers. These civil acquaintances only abuse both children and parents behind their backs, for the very bad habits which they help to encourage.

The hot-tempered gentleman's treatment of his young friends was very different. One day he was

talking to Polly, and making some kind inquiries about her lessons, to which she was replying in a quiet and sensible fashion, when up came Master Harry, and began to display his wit by comments on the conversation, and by snapping at and contradicting his sister's remarks, to which she retorted; and the usual snap-dialogue went on as before.

"Then you like music," said the hot-tempered gentleman.

"Yes, I like it very much," said Polly.

"Oh, do you?" Harry broke in. "Then what are you always crying over it for?"

"I'm not always crying over it."

"Yes, you are."

"No, I'm not. I only cry sometimes, when I stick fast."

"Your music must be very sticky, for you're always stuck fast."

"Hold your tongue!" said the hot-tempered gentleman.

With what he imagined to be a very waggish air, Harry put out his tongue, and held it with his finger and thumb. It was unfortunate that he had not time to draw it in again before the hot-tempered gentleman gave him a stinging box on the ear, which brought his teeth rather sharply together on the tip of his tongue, which was bitten in consequence.

"It's no use *speaking*," said the hot-tempered gentleman, driving his hands through his hair.

Children are like dogs, they are very good judges of their real friends. Harry did not like the hot-tempered gentleman a bit the less because he was obliged to respect and obey him ; and all the children welcomed him boisterously when he arrived that Christmas which we have spoken of in connection with his attack on Snap.

It was on the morning of Christmas Eve that the china punch-bowl was broken. Mr. Skratdj had a warm dispute with Mrs. Skratdj as to whether it had been kept in a safe place ; after which both had a brisk encounter with the housemaid, who did not know how it happened ; and she, flouncing down the back passage, kicked Snap ; who forthwith flew at the gardener as he was bringing in the horse-radish for the beef ; who stepping backwards trode upon the cat ; who spit and swore, and went up the pump with her tail as big as a fox's brush.

To avoid this domestic scene, the hot-tempered gentleman withdrew to the breakfast-room and took up a newspaper. By and by, Harry and Polly came in, and they were soon snapping comfortably over their own affairs in a corner.

The hot-tempered gentleman's umber eyes had

been looking over the top of his newspaper at them for some time, before he called, "Harry, my boy!"

And Harry came up to him.

"Show me your tongue, Harry," said he.

"What for?" said Harry; "you're not a doctor."

"Do as I tell you," said the hot-tempered gentleman; and as Harry saw his hand moving, he put his tongue out with all possible haste. The hot-tempered gentleman sighed. "Ah!" he said, in depressed tones; "I thought so!—Polly, come and let me look at yours."

Polly, who had crept up during this process, now put out hers. But the hot-tempered gentleman looked gloomier still, and shook his head.

"What is it?" cried both the children. "What do you mean?" And they seized the tips of their tongues with their fingers, to feel for themselves.

But the hot-tempered gentleman went slowly out of the room without answering; passing his hands through his hair, and saying, "Ah! Hum!" and nodding with an air of grave foreboding.

Just as he crossed the threshold, he turned back, and put his head into the room. "Have you ever noticed that your tongues are growing pointed?" he asked.

"No!" cried the children with alarm. "Are they?"

“If ever you find them becoming forked,” said the gentleman in solemn tones, “let me know.”

With which he departed, gravely shaking his head.

In the afternoon the children attacked him again.

“*Do* tell us what’s the matter with our tongues.”

“You were snapping and squabbling just as usual this morning,” said the hot-tempered gentleman.

“Well, we forgot,” said Polly. “We don’t mean anything, you know. But never mind that now, please. Tell us about our tongues. What is going to happen to them?”

“I’m very much afraid,” said the hot-tempered gentleman, in solemn measured tones, “that you are both of you—fast—going—to—the——”

“Dogs?” suggested Harry, who was learned in cant expressions.

“Dogs!” said the hot-tempered gentleman, driving his hands through his hair. “Bless your life, no! Nothing half so pleasant! (That is, unless all dogs were like Snap, which mercifully they are not.) No, my sad fear is, that you are both of you—rapidly—going—to the *Snap-Dragons!*”

And not another word would the hot-tempered gentleman say on the subject.

CHRISTMAS EVE.

In the course of a few hours Mr. and Mrs. Skratdj recovered their equanimity. The punch was brewed in a jug, and tasted quite as good as usual. The evening was very lively. There were a Christmas tree, Yule cakes, log, and candles, furmety, and snap-dragon after supper. When the company was tired of the tree, and had gained an appetite by the hard exercise of stretching to high branches, blowing out "dangerous" tapers, and cutting ribbon and pack-thread in all directions, supper came, with its welcome cakes and furmety and punch. And when furmety somewhat palled upon the taste (and it must be admitted to boast more sentiment than flavour as a Christmas dish), the Yule candles were blown out, and both the spirits and the palates of the party were stimulated by the mysterious and pungent pleasures of snap-dragon.

Then, as the hot-tempered gentleman warmed his coat-tails at the Yule log, a grim smile stole over his features as he listened to the sounds in the room. In the darkness the blue flames leaped and danced, the raisins were snapped and snatched from hand to hand, scattering fragments of flame hither and thither. The children shouted as the fiery sweetmeats burnt

away the mawkish taste of the furmety. Mr. Skratdj cried that they were spoiling the carpet; Mrs. Skratdj complained that he had spilled some brandy on her dress. Mr. Skratdj retorted that she should not wear dresses so susceptible of damage in the family circle. Mrs. Skratdj recalled an old speech of Mr. Skratdj's on the subject of wearing one's nice things for the benefit of one's family, and not reserving them for visitors. Mr. Skratdj remembered that Mrs. Skratdj's excuse for buying that particular dress when she did not need it, was her intention of keeping it for the next year. The children disputed as to the credit for courage and the amount of raisins due to each. Snap barked furiously at the flames; and the maids hustled each other for good places in the doorway, and would not have allowed the man-servant to see at all, but he looked over their heads.

"St! St! At it! At it!" chuckled the hot-tempered gentleman in undertones. And when he said this, it seemed as if the voices of Mr. and Mrs. Skratdj rose higher in matrimonial repartee, and the children's squabbles became louder, and the dog yelped as if he were mad, and the maids' contest was sharper; whilst the snap-dragon flames leaped up and up, and blue fire flew about the room like foam.

At last the raisins were finished, the flames were

all but out, and the company withdrew to the drawing-room. Only Harry lingered.

“Come along, Harry,” said the hot-tempered gentleman.

“Wait a minute,” said Harry.

“You had better come,” said the gentleman.

“Why?” said Harry.

“There’s nothing to stop for. The raisins are eaten, the brandy is burnt out——”

“No, it’s not,” said Harry.

“Well, almost. It would be better if it were quite out. Now come. It’s dangerous for a boy like you to be alone with the Snap-Dragons to-night.”

“Fiddle-sticks!” said Harry.

“Go your own way, then!” said the hot-tempered gentleman; and he bounced out of the room, and Harry was left alone.

DANCING WITH THE DRAGONS.

He crept up to the table, where one little pale blue flame flickered in the snap-dragon dish.

“What a pity it should go out!” said Harry. At this moment the brandy-bottle on the sideboard caught his eye.

“Just a little more,” muttered Harry to himself;

and he uncorked the bottle, and poured a little brandy on to the flame.

Now of course, as soon as the brandy touched the fire, all the brandy in the bottle blazed up at once, and the bottle split to pieces; and it was very fortunate for Harry that he did not get seriously hurt. A little of the hot brandy did get into his eyes, and made them smart, so that he had to shut them for a few seconds.

But when he opened them again, what a sight he saw! All over the room the blue flames leaped and danced as they had leaped and danced in the soup-plate with the raisins. And Harry saw that each successive flame was the fold in the long body of a bright blue Dragon, which moved like the body of a snake. And the room was full of these Dragons. In the face they were like the dragons one sees made of very old blue and white china; and they had forked tongues, like the tongues of serpents. They were most beautiful in colour, being sky-blue. Lobsters who have just changed their coats are very handsome, but the violet and indigo of a lobster's coat is nothing to the brilliant sky-blue of a Snap-Dragon.

How they leaped about! They were for ever leaping over each other like seals at play. But if it was "play" at all with them, it was of a very rough

kind ; for as they jumped, they snapped and barked at each other, and their barking was like that of the barking Gnu in the Zoological Gardens ; and from time to time they tore the hair out of each other's heads with their claws, and scattered it about the floor. And as it dropped it was like the flecks of flame people shake from their fingers when they are eating snap-dragon raisins.

Harry stood aghast.

“What fun !” cried a voice close behind him ; and he saw that one of the Dragons was lying near, and not joining in the game. He had lost one of the forks of his tongue by accident, and could not bark for awhile.

“I'm glad you think it funny,” said Harry ; “I don't.”

“That's right. Snap away !” sneered the Dragon. “You're a perfect treasure. They'll take you in with them the third round.”

“Not those creatures ?” cried Harry.

“Yes, those creatures. And if I hadn't lost my bark, I'd be the first to lead you off,” said the Dragon.

“Oh, the game will exactly suit you.”

“What is it, please ?” Harry asked.

“You'd better not say ‘please’ to the others,” said the Dragon, “if you don't want to have all your hair pulled out. The game is this. You have always

to be jumping over somebody else, and you must either talk or bark. If anybody speaks to you, you must snap in return. I need not explain what *snapping* is. *You know*. If any one by accident gives a civil answer, a claw-full of hair is torn out of his head to stimulate his brain. Nothing can be funnier."

"I dare say it suits you capitally," said Harry; "but I'm sure we shouldn't like it. I mean men and women and children. It wouldn't do for us at all."

"Wouldn't it?" said the Dragon. "You don't know how many human beings dance with dragons on Christmas Eve. If we are kept going in a house till after midnight, we can pull people out of their beds, and take them to dance in Vesuvius."

"Vesuvius!" cried Harry.

"Yes, Vesuvius. We come from Italy originally, you know. Our skins are the colour of the Bay of Naples. We live on dried grapes and ardent spirits. We have glorious fun in the mountain sometimes. Oh! what snapping, and scratching, and tearing! Delicious! There are times when the squabbling becomes too great, and Mother Mountain won't stand it, and spits us all out, and throws cinders after us. But this is only at times. We had a charming meeting last year. So many human beings, and how they *can* snap! It was a choice party. So very select. We always have plenty of saucy children, and servants.

Husbands and wives too, and quite as many of the former as the latter, if not more. But besides these, we had two vestry-men; a country postman, who devoted his talents to insulting the public instead of to learning the postal regulations; three cabmen and two "fares"; two young shop-girls from a Berlin wool shop in a town where there was no competition; four commercial travellers; six landladies; six Old Bailey lawyers; several widows from almshouses; seven single gentlemen and nine cats, who swore at everything; a dozen sulphur-coloured screaming cockatoos; a lot of street children from a town; a pack of mongrel curs from the colonies, who snapped at the human beings' heels; and five elderly ladies in their Sunday bonnets with Prayer-books, who had been fighting for good seats in church."

"Dear me!" said Harry.

"If you can find nothing sharper to say than 'Dear me,'" said the Dragon, "you will fare badly, I can tell you. Why, I thought you'd a sharp tongue, but it's not forked yet, I see. Here they are, however. Off with you! And if you value your curls—Snap!"

And before Harry could reply, the Snap-Dragons came in on their third round, and as they passed they swept Harry along with them.

He shuddered as he looked at his companions.

They were as transparent as shrimps, but of a lovely cerulæan blue. And as they leaped they barked—"Howf! Howf!"—like barking Gnus; and when they leaped Harry had to leap with them. Besides barking, they snapped and wrangled with each other; and in this Harry must join also.

"Pleasant, isn't it?" said one of the blue Dragons.

"Not at all," snapped Harry.

"That's your bad taste," snapped the blue Dragon.

"No, it's not!" snapped Harry.

"Then it's pride and perverseness. You want your hair combing."

"Oh, please don't!" shrieked Harry, forgetting himself. On which the Dragon clawed a handful of hair out of his head, and Harry screamed, and the blue Dragons barked and danced.

"That made your hair curl, didn't it?" asked another Dragon, leaping over Harry.

"That's no business of yours," Harry snapped, as well as he could for crying.

"It's more my pleasure than business," retorted the Dragon.

"Keep it to yourself, then," snapped Harry.

"I mean to share it with you, when I get hold of your hair," snapped the Dragon.

“Wait till you get the chance,” Harry snapped, with desperate presence of mind.

“Do you know whom you’re talking to?” roared the Dragon; and he opened his mouth from ear to ear, and shot out his forked tongue in Harry’s face; and the boy was so frightened that he forgot to snap, and cried piteously,

“Oh, I beg your pardon, please don’t!”

On which the blue Dragon clawed another handful of hair out of his head, and all the Dragons barked as before.

How long the dreadful game went on Harry never exactly knew. Well practised as he was in snapping in the nursery, he often failed to think of a retort, and paid for his unreadiness by the loss of his hair. Oh, how foolish and wearisome all this rudeness and snapping now seemed to him! But on he had to go, wondering all the time how near it was to twelve o’clock, and whether the Snap-Dragons would stay till midnight and take him with them to Vesuvius.

At last, to his joy, it became evident that the brandy was coming to an end. The Dragons moved slower, they could not leap so high, and at last one after another they began to go out.

“Oh, if they only all of them get away before twelve!” thought poor Harry.

At last there was only one. He and Harry

jumped about and snapped and barked, and Harry was thinking with joy that he was the last, when the clock in the hall gave that whirring sound which some clocks do before they strike, as if it were clearing its throat.

“Oh, *please* go!” screamed Harry in despair.

The blue Dragon leaped up, and took such a claw-full of hair out of the boy's head, that it seemed as if part of the skin went too. But that leap was his last. He went out at once, vanishing before the first stroke of twelve. And Harry was left on his face on the floor in the darkness.

CONCLUSION.

When his friends found him there was blood on his forehead. Harry thought it was where the Dragon had clawed him, but they said it was a cut from a fragment of the broken brandy-bottle. The Dragons had disappeared as completely as the brandy.

Harry was cured of snapping. He had had quite enough of it for a lifetime, and the catch-contradictions of the household now made him shudder. Polly had not had the benefit of his experiences, and yet she improved also.

In the first place, snapping, like other kinds of

quarrelling, requires two parties to it, and Harry would never be a party to snapping any more. And when he gave civil and kind answers to Polly's smart speeches, she felt ashamed of herself, and did not repeat them.

In the second place, she heard about the Snap-Dragons. Harry told all about it to her and to the hot-tempered gentleman.

"Now do you think it's true?" Polly asked the hot-tempered man.

"Hum! Ha!" said he, driving his hands through his hair. "You know I warned you, you were going to the Snap-Dragons."

* * * * *

Harry and Polly snubbed "the little ones" when they snapped, and utterly discountenanced snapping in the nursery. The example and admonitions of elder children are a powerful instrument of nursery discipline, and before long there was not a "sharp tongue" amongst all the little Skratdjs.

But I doubt if the parents ever were cured. I don't know if they heard the story. Besides, bad habits are not easily cured when one is old.

I fear Mr. and Mrs. Skratdj have yet got to dance with the Dragons.

OLD FATHER CHRISTMAS.

OLD FATHER CHRISTMAS.

AN OLD-FASHIONED TALE OF THE YOUNG
DAYS OF A GRUMPY OLD GODFATHER.

CHAPTER I.

“CAN you fancy, young people,” said Godfather Garbel, winking with his prominent eyes, and moving his feet backwards and forwards in his square shoes, so that you could hear the squeak-leather half a room off—“can you fancy my having been a very little boy, and having a godmother? But I had, and she sent me presents on my birthdays too. And young people did not get presents when I was a child as they get them now. *Grumph!* We had not half so many toys as you have, but we kept them twice as long. I think we were fonder of them too, though they were neither so handsome nor so expensive as these new-fangled affairs you are always breaking about the house. *Grumph!*”

“You see, middle-class folk were more saving

then. My mother turned and dyed her dresses, and when she had done with them, the servant was very glad to have them ; but, bless me ! your mother's maids dress so much finer than their mistress, I do not think they would say 'thank you' for her best Sunday silk. The bustle's the wrong shape. *Grumph !*

"What's that you are laughing at, little miss ? It's *pannier*, is it ? Well, well, bustle or pannier, call it what you like ; but only donkeys wore panniers in my young days, and many's the ride I've had in them.

"Now, as I say, my relations and friends thought twice before they pulled out five shillings in a toy-shop, but they didn't forget me, all the same.

"On my eighth birthday my mother gave me a bright blue comforter of her own knitting.

"My little sister gave me a ball. My mother had cut out the divisions from various bits in the rag-bag, and my sister had done some of the seaming. It was stuffed with bran, and had a cork inside which had broken from old age, and would no longer fit the pickle-jar it belonged to. This made the ball bound when we played 'prisoner's base.'

"My father gave me the broken driving-whip that had lost the lash, and an old pair of his gloves, to play coachman with ; these I had long wished for, since next to sailing in a ship, in my ideas, came the honour and glory of driving a coach.

“My whole soul, I must tell you, was set upon being a sailor. In those days I had rather put to sea once on Farmer Fodder’s duck-pond than ride twice atop of his hay-waggon; and between the smell of hay and the softness of it, and the height you are up above other folk, and the danger of tumbling off if you don’t look out—for hay is elastic as well as soft—you don’t easily beat a ride on a hay-waggon for pleasure. But as I say, I’d rather put to sea on the duck-pond, though the best craft I could borrow was the pigstye-door, and a pole to punt with, and the village boys jeering when I got aground, which was most of the time—besides the duck-pond never having a wave on it worth the name, punt as you would, and so shallow you could not have got drowned in it to save your life.

“You’re laughing now, little master, are you? But let me tell you that drowning’s the death for a sailor, whatever you may think. So I’ve always maintained, and have given every navigable sea in the known world a chance, though here I am after all, laid up in arm-chairs and feather-beds, to wait for bronchitis or some other slow poison. *Grumph!*

“Well, we must all go as we’re called, sailors or landsmen, and as I was saying, if I was never to sail a ship, I would have liked to drive a coach. A mail coach, serving His Majesty (Her Majesty now, GOD

bless her!), carrying the Royal Arms, and bound to go, rough weather and fair. Many's the time I've done it (in play you understand) with that whip and those gloves. Dear! dear! The pains I took to teach my sister Patty to be a highwayman, and jump out on me from the drying-ground hedge in the dusk with a 'Stand and deliver!' which she couldn't get out of her throat for fright, and wouldn't jump hard enough for fear of hurting me.

"The whip and the gloves gave me joy, I can tell you; but there was more to come.

"Kitty the servant gave me a shell that she had had by her for years. How I had coveted that shell! It had this remarkable property: when you put it to your ear, you could hear the roaring of the sea. I had never seen the sea, but Kitty was born in a fisherman's cottage, and many an hour have I sat by the kitchen fire whilst she told me strange stories of the mighty ocean, and ever and anon she would snatch the shell from the mantelpiece and clap it to my ear, crying, 'There, child, you couldn't hear it plainer than that. It's the very moral!'

"When Kitty gave me that shell for my very own, I felt that life had little more to offer. I held it to every ear in the house, including the cat's; and, seeing Dick the sexton's son go by with an armful of straw to stuff Guy Fawkes, I ran out, and in my

anxiety to make him share the treat, and learn what the sea is like, I clapped the shell to his ear so smartly and unexpectedly, that he, thinking me to have struck him, knocked me down then and there with his bundle of straw. When he understood the rights of the case, he begged my pardon handsomely, and gave me two whole treacle-sticks and part of a third out of his breeches-pocket, in return for which I forgave him freely, and promised to let him hear the sea roar on every Saturday half-holiday till farther notice.

“And speaking of Dick and the straw reminds me that my birthday falls on the fifth of November. From this it came about that I always had to bear a good many jokes about being burnt as a Guy Fawkes ; but, on the other hand, I was allowed to make a small bonfire of my own, and to have eight potatoes to roast therein, and eight-pennyworth of crackers to let off in the evening. A potato and a pennyworth of crackers for every year of my life.

“On this eighth birthday, having got all the above-named gifts, I cried, in the fulness of my heart, ‘There never was such a day!’ And yet there was more to come, for the evening coach brought me a parcel, and the parcel was my godmother’s picture-book.

“My godmother was a gentlewoman of small means ; but she was accomplished. She could make very spirited sketches, and knew how to colour them

after they were outlined and shaded in Indian ink. She had a pleasant talent for versifying. She was very industrious. I have it from her own lips that she copied the figures in my picture-book from prints in several different houses at which she visited. They were fancy portraits of characters, most of which were familiar to my mind. There were Guy Fawkes, Punch, his then Majesty the King, Bogy, the Man in the Moon, the Clerk of the Weather Office, a Dunce, and Old Father Christmas. Beneath each sketch was a stanza of my godmother's own composing.

“My godmother was very ingenious. She had been mainly guided in her choice of these characters by the prints she happened to meet with, as she did not trust herself to design a figure. But if she could not get exactly what she wanted, she had a clever knack of tracing the outline of an attitude from some engraving, and altering the figure to suit her purpose in the finished sketch. She was the soul of truthfulness, and the notes she added to the index of contents in my picture-book spoke at once for her honesty in avowing obligations, and her ingenuity in availing herself of opportunities.

“They ran thus :—

No. 1.—GUY FAWKES. Outlined from a figure of a warehouseman rolling a sherry flask into Mr. Rudd's wine-

vaults. I added the hat, cloak, and boots in the finished drawing.

No. 2.—PUNCH. I sketched him from the life.

No. 3.—HIS MOST GRACIOUS MAJESTY THE KING. On a quart jug bought in Cheapside.

No. 4.—BOGY, *with bad boys in the bag on his back*. Outlined from Christian bending under his burden, in my mother's old copy of the *Pilgrim's Progress*. The face from Giant Despair.

No. 5 and No. 6.—THE MAN IN THE MOON, and THE CLERK OF THE WEATHER OFFICE. From a book of caricatures belonging to Dr. James.

No. 7.—A DUNCE. From a steel engraving framed in rosewood that hangs in my Uncle Wilkinson's parlour.

No. 8.—OLD FATHER CHRISTMAS. From a German book at Lady Littleham's.

CHAPTER II.

“MY sister Patty was six years old. We loved each other dearly. The picture-book was almost as much hers as mine. We sat so long together on one big footstool by the fire, with our arms round each other, and the book resting on our knees, that Kitty called down blessings on my godmother’s head for having sent a volume that kept us both so long out of mischief.

“‘If books was allus as useful as that, they’d do for me,’ said she; and though this speech did not mean much, it was a great deal for Kitty to say; since, not being herself an educated person, she naturally thought that ‘little enough good comes of larning.’

“Patty and I had our favourites amongst the pictures. Bogy, now, was a character one did not care to think about too near bed-time. I was tired of Guy Fawkes, and thought he looked more natural made of straw, as Dick did him. The Dunce was a little too personal; but Old Father Christmas took

our hearts by storm ; we had never seen anything like him, though now-a-days you may get a plaster figure of him in any toy-shop at Christmas-time, with hair and beard like cotton-wool, and a Christmas-tree in his hand.

“The custom of Christmas-trees came from Germany. I can remember when they were first introduced into England, and what wonderful things we thought them. Now, every village school has its tree, and the scholars openly discuss whether the presents have been ‘good’ or ‘mean,’ as compared with other trees of former years.

“The first one that I ever saw I believed to have come from good Father Christmas himself ; but little boys have grown too wise now to be taken in for their own amusement. They are not excited by secret and mysterious preparations in the back drawing-room ; they hardly confess to the thrill—which I feel to this day—when the folding-doors are thrown open, and amid the blaze of tapers, Mamma, like a Fate, advances with her scissors to give every one what falls to his lot.

“Well, young people, when I was eight years old I had not seen a Christmas-tree, and the first picture of one I ever saw was the picture of that held by Old Father Christmas in my godmother’s picture-book.

“‘What are those things on the tree?’ I asked.

“ ‘Candles,’ said my father.

“ ‘No, father, not the candles ; the other things?’

“ ‘Those are toys, my son.’

“ ‘Are they ever taken off?’

“ ‘Yes, they are taken off, and given to the children who stand round the tree.’

“Patty and I grasped each other by the hand, and with one voice murmured, ‘How kind of Old Father Christmas!’

“By and by I asked, ‘How old is Father Christmas?’

“My father laughed, and said, ‘One thousand eight hundred and thirty years, child,’ which was then the year of our Lord, and thus one thousand eight hundred and thirty years since the first great Christmas Day.

“ ‘He *looks* very old,’ whispered Patty.

“And I, who was, for my age, what Kitty called ‘Bible-learned,’ said thoughtfully, and with some puzzledness of mind, ‘Then he’s older than Methuselah.’

“But my father had left the room, and did not hear my difficulty.

“November and December went by, and still the picture-book kept all its charm for Patty and me ; and we pondered on and loved Old Father Christmas as children can love and realize a fancy friend. To

those who remember the fancies of their childhood I need say no more.

“Christmas week came, Christmas Eve came. My father and mother were mysteriously and unaccountably busy in the parlour (we had only one parlour), and Patty and I were not allowed to go in. We went into the kitchen, but even here was no place of rest for us. Kitty was ‘all over the place,’ as she phrased it, and cakes, mince-pies, and puddings were with her. As she justly observed, ‘There was no place there for children and books to sit with their toes in the fire, when a body wanted to be at the oven all along. The cat was enough for *her* temper,’ she added.

“As to puss, who obstinately refused to take a hint which drove her out into the Christmas frost, she returned again and again with soft steps, and a stupidity that was, I think, affected, to the warm hearth, only to fly at intervals, like a football, before Kitty’s hasty slipper.

“We had more sense, or less courage. We bowed to Kitty’s behests, and went to the back door.

“Patty and I were hardy children, and accustomed to ‘run out’ in all weathers, without much extra wrapping up. We put Kitty’s shawl over our two heads, and went outside. I rather hoped to see something of Dick, for it was holiday time; but no

Dick passed. He was busy helping his father to bore holes in the carved seats of the church, which were to hold sprigs of holly for the morrow—that was the idea of church decoration in my young days. You have improved on your elders there, young people, and I am candid enough to allow it. Still, the sprigs of red and green were better than nothing, and, like your lovely wreaths and pious devices, they made one feel as if the old black wood were bursting into life and leaf again for very Christmas joy!

“And, if one only knelt carefully, they did not scratch his nose,” added Godfather Garbel, chuckling and rubbing his own, which was large and rather red.

“Well,” he continued, “Dick was busy, and not to be seen. We ran across the little yard and looked over the wall at the end to see if we could see anything or anybody. From this point there was a pleasant meadow field sloping prettily away to a little hill about three-quarters of a mile distant; which, catching some fine breezes from the moors beyond, was held to be a place of cure for whooping-cough, or ‘kinkcough,’ as it was vulgarly called. Up to the top of this Kitty had dragged me, and carried Patty, when we were recovering from the complaint, as I well remember. It was the only ‘change of air’ we could afford, and I dare say it did as well as if we had gone into badly-drained lodgings at the seaside.

“This hill was now covered with snow, and stood off against the grey sky. The white fields looked vast and dreary in the dusk. The only gay things to be seen were the red berries on the holly hedge, in the little lane—which, running by the end of our backyard, led up to the Hall—and a fat robin redbreast who was staring at me. I was watching the robin, when Patty, who had been peering out of her corner of Kitty’s shawl, gave a great jump that dragged the shawl from our heads, and cried,

“‘LOOK!’

CHAPTER III.

“I LOOKED. An old man was coming along the lane. His hair and beard were as white as cotton-wool. He had a face like the sort of apple that keeps well in winter ; his coat was old and brown. There was snow about him in patches, and he carried a small fir-tree.

“The same conviction seized upon us both. With one breath we exclaimed, ‘*It’s Old Father Christmas !*’

“I know now that it was only an old man of the place, with whom we did not happen to be acquainted, and that he was taking a little fir-tree up to the Hall, to be made into a Christmas-tree. He was a very good-humoured old fellow, and rather deaf, for which he made up by smiling and nodding his head a good deal, and saying, ‘Aye, aye, *to be sure !*’ at likely intervals.

“As he passed us and met our earnest gaze, he smiled and nodded so affably, that I was bold enough to cry, ‘Good-evening, Father Christmas !’

“‘Same to you!’ said he, in a high-pitched voice.

“‘Then you *are* Father Christmas?’ said Patty.

“‘And a Happy New Year,’ was Father Christmas’s reply, which rather put me out. But he smiled in such a satisfactory manner, that Patty went on, ‘You’re very old, aren’t you?’

“‘So I be, miss, so I be,’ said Father Christmas, nodding.

“‘Father says you’re eighteen hundred and thirty years old,’ I muttered.

“‘Aye, aye, to be sure,’ said Father Christmas, ‘I’m a long age.’

“A *very* long age, thought I, and I added, ‘You’re nearly twice as old as Methuselah, you know,’ thinking that this might not have struck him.

“‘Aye, aye,’ said Father Christmas; but he did not seem to think anything of it. After a pause he held up the tree, and cried, ‘D’ye know what this is, little miss?’

“‘A Christmas-tree,’ said Patty.

“And the old man smiled and nodded.

“I leant over the wall, and shouted, ‘But there are no candles.’

“‘By and by,’ said Father Christmas, nodding as before. ‘When it’s dark they’ll all be lighted up. That’ll be a fine sight!’

“‘Toys too, there’ll be, won’t there?’ screamed Patty.

“Father Christmas nodded his head. ‘And sweeties,’ he added, expressively.

“I could feel Patty trembling, and my own heart beat fast. The thought which agitated us both, was this—‘Was Father Christmas bringing the tree to us?’ But very anxiety, and some modesty also, kept us from asking outright.

“Only when the old man shouldered his tree, and prepared to move on, I cried in despair, ‘Oh, are you going?’

“‘I’m coming back by and by,’ said he.

“‘How soon?’ cried Patty.

“‘About four o’clock,’ said the old man, smiling. ‘I’m only going up yonder.’

“And, nodding and smiling as he went, he passed away down the lane.

“‘Up yonder.’ This puzzled us. Father Christmas had pointed, but so indefinitely, that he might have been pointing to the sky, or the fields, or the little wood at the end of the Squire’s grounds. I thought the latter, and suggested to Patty that perhaps he had some place underground, like Aladdin’s cave, where he got the candles, and all the pretty things for the tree. This idea pleased us both, and we amused ourselves by wondering what Old Father Christmas

would choose for us from his stores in that wonderful hole where he dressed his Christmas-trees.

“‘I wonder, Patty,’ said I, ‘why there’s no picture of Father Christmas’s dog in the book.’ For at the old man’s heels in the lane there crept a little brown and white spaniel, looking very dirty in the snow.

“‘Perhaps it’s a new dog that he’s got to take care of his cave,’ said Patty.

“When we went indoors we examined the picture afresh by the dim light from the passage window, but found no dog there.

“My father passed us at this moment, and patted my head. ‘Father,’ said I, ‘I don’t know, but I do think Old Father Christmas is going to bring us a Christmas-tree to-night.’

“‘Who’s been telling you that?’ said my father. But he passed on before I could explain that we had seen Father Christmas himself, and had had his word for it that he would return at four o’clock, and that the candles on his tree would be lighted as soon as it was dark.

“We hovered on the outskirts of the rooms till four o’clock came. We sat on the stairs and watched the big clock, which I was just learning to read; and Patty made herself giddy with constantly looking up and counting the four strokes, towards which the hour hand slowly moved. We put our noses into the

kitchen now and then, to smell the cakes and get warm, and anon we hung about the parlour door, and were most unjustly accused of trying to peep. What did we care what our mother was doing in the parlour?—we who had seen Old Father Christmas himself, and were expecting him back again every moment!

“At last the church clock struck. The sounds boomed heavily through the frost, and Patty thought there were four of them. Then, after due choking and whirring, our own clock struck, and we counted the strokes quite clearly—one! two! three! four! Then we got Kitty’s shawl once more, and stole out into the back-yard. We ran to our old place, and peeped, but could see nothing.

“‘We’d better get up on to the wall,’ I said; and with some difficulty and distress from rubbing her bare knees against the cold stones, and getting the snow up her sleeves, Patty got on the coping of the little wall. I was just struggling after her, when something warm and something cold coming suddenly against the bare calves of my legs, made me shriek with fright. I came down ‘with a run,’ and bruised my knees, my elbows, and my chin; and the snow that hadn’t gone up Patty’s sleeves, went down my neck. Then I found that the cold thing was a dog’s nose, and the warm thing was his tongue; and Patty

cried from her post of observation, 'It's Father Christmas's dog, and he's licking your legs.'

"It really was the dirty little brown and white spaniel; and he persisted in licking me, and jumping on me, and making curious little noises, that must have meant something if one had known his language. I was rather harassed at the moment. My legs were sore, I was a little afraid of the dog, and Patty was very much afraid of sitting on the wall without me.

"'You won't fall,' I said to her. 'Get down, will you!' I said to the dog.

"'Humpty Dumpty fell off a wall,' said Patty.

"'Bow! wow!' said the dog.

"I pulled Patty down, and the dog tried to pull me down; but when my little sister was on her feet, to my relief, he transferred his attentions to her. When he had jumped at her, and licked her several times, he turned round and ran away.

"'He's gone,' said I; 'I'm so glad.'

"But even as I spoke he was back again, crouching at Patty's feet, and glaring at her with eyes the colour of his ears.

"Now Patty was very fond of animals, and when the dog looked at her she looked at the dog, and then she said to me, 'He wants us to go with him.'

"On which (as if he understood our language, though we were ignorant of his) the spaniel sprang

away, and went off as hard as he could ; and Patty and I went after him, a dim hope crossing my mind—
'Perhaps Father Christmas has sent him for us.'

"This idea was rather favoured by the fact that the dog led us up the lane. Only a little way ; then he stopped by something lying in the ditch—and once more we cried in the same breath, 'It's Old Father Christmas !'

CHAPTER IV.

“RETURNING from the Hall, the old man had slipped upon a bit of ice, and lay stunned in the snow.

“Patty began to cry. ‘I think he’s dead,’ she sobbed.

“‘He is so very old, I don’t wonder,’ I murmured ; ‘but perhaps he’s not. I’ll fetch Father.’

“My father and Kitty were soon on the spot. Kitty was as strong as a man ; and they carried Father Christmas between them into the kitchen. There he quickly revived.

“I must do Kitty the justice to say that she did not utter a word of complaint at this disturbance of her labours ; and that she drew the old man’s chair close up to the oven with her own hand. She was so much affected by the behaviour of his dog, that she admitted him even to the hearth ; on which puss, being acute enough to see how matters stood, lay down with her back so close to the spaniel’s that Kitty could not expel one without kicking both.

“For our parts, we felt sadly anxious about the

tree ; otherwise we could have wished for no better treat than to sit at Kitty's round table taking tea with Father Christmas. Our usual fare of thick bread and treacle was to-night exchanged for a delicious variety of cakes, which were none the worse to us for being 'tasters and wasters'—that is, little bits of dough, or shortbread, put in to try the state of the oven, and certain cakes that had got broken or burnt in the baking.

“Well, there we sat, helping Old Father Christmas to tea and cake, and wondering in our hearts what could have become of the tree. But you see, young people, when I was a child, parents were stricter than they are now. Even before Kitty died (and she has been dead many a long year) there was a change, and she said that 'children got to think anything became them.' I think we were taught more honest shame about certain things than I often see in little boys and girls now. We were ashamed of boasting, or being greedy, or selfish ; we were ashamed of asking for anything that was not offered to us, and of interrupting grown-up people, or talking about ourselves. Why, papas and mammas now-a-days seem quite proud to let their friends see how bold and greedy and talkative their children can be ! A lady said to me the other day, 'You wouldn't believe, Mr. Garbel, how forward dear little Harry is for his age.

He has his word in everything, and is not a bit shy! and his papa never comes home from town but Harry runs to ask him if he's brought him a present. Papa says he'll be the ruin of him!

“ ‘Madam,’ said I, ‘even without your word for it, I am quite aware that your child is forward. He is forward and greedy and intrusive, as you justly point out, and I wish you joy of him when those qualities are fully developed. I think his father’s fears are well founded.’

“ But, bless me! now-a-days it’s ‘Come and tell Mr. Smith what a fine boy you are, and how many houses you can build with your bricks,’ or, ‘The dear child wants everything he sees,’ or ‘Little pet never lets Mamma alone for a minute; does she, love?’ But in my young days it was, ‘Self-praise is no recommendation’ (as Kitty used to tell me), or, ‘You’re knocking too hard at No. One’ (as my father said when we talked about ourselves), or, ‘Little boys should be seen but not heard’ (as a rule of conduct ‘in company’), or, ‘Don’t ask for what you want, but take what’s given you and be thankful.’

“ And so you see, young people, Patty and I felt a delicacy in asking Old Father Christmas about the tree. It was not till we had had tea three times round, with tasters and wasters to match, that Patty said very gently, ‘It’s quite dark now.’ And then she heaved a deep sigh.

“ Burning anxiety overcame me. I leant towards Father Christmas, and shouted—I had found out that it was needful to shout—

“ ‘ I suppose the candles are on the tree now ? ’

“ ‘ Just about putting of ’em on, ’ said Father Christmas.

“ ‘ And the presents, too ? ’ said Patty.

“ ‘ Aye, aye, *to* be sure, ’ said Father Christmas, and he smiled delightfully.

“ I was thinking what farther questions I might venture upon, when he pushed his cup towards Patty, saying, ‘ Since you are so pressing, miss, I’ll take another dish. ’

“ And Kitty, swooping on us from the oven, cried, ‘ Make yourself at home, sir ; there’s more where these came from. Make a long arm, Miss Patty, and hand them cakes. ’

“ So we had to devote ourselves to the duties of the table ; and Patty, holding the lid with one hand and pouring out with the other, supplied Father Christmas’s wants with a heavy heart.

“ At last he was satisfied. I said grace, during which he stood, and indeed he stood for some time afterwards with his eyes shut—I fancy under the impression that I was still speaking. He had just said a fervent ‘ Amen, ’ and reseated himself, when my father put his head into the kitchen, and made this remarkable statement—

“ ‘Old Father Christmas has sent a tree to the young people.’

“ Patty and I uttered a cry of delight, and we forthwith danced round the old man, saying, ‘Oh, how nice! Oh, how kind of you!’ which I think must have bewildered him, but he only smiled and nodded.

“ ‘Come along,’ said my father. ‘Come, children. Come, Reuben. Come, Kitty.’

“And he went into the parlour, and we all followed him.

“My godmother’s picture of a Christmas-tree was very pretty; and the flames of the candles were so naturally done in red and yellow, that I always wondered that they did not shine at night. But the picture was nothing to the reality. We had been sitting almost in the dark, for, as Kitty said, ‘Firelight was quite enough to burn at meal-times.’ And when the parlour door was thrown open, and the tree, with lighted tapers on all the branches, burst upon our view, the blaze was dazzling, and threw such a glory round the little gifts, and the bags of coloured muslin with acid drops, and pink rose drops, and comfits inside, as I shall never forget. We all got something; and Patty and I, at any rate, believed that the things came from the stores of Old Father Christmas. We were not undeceived even by his gratefully accepting a bundle of old clothes which had been hastily put together to form his present.

“We were all very happy; even Kitty, I think, though she kept her sleeves rolled up, and seemed rather to grudge enjoying herself (a weak point in some energetic characters). She went back to her oven before the lights were out, and the angel on the top of the tree taken down. She locked up her present (a little work-box) at once. She often showed it off afterwards, but it was kept in the same bit of tissue-paper till she died. Our presents certainly did not last so long!

“The old man died about a week afterwards, so we never made his acquaintance as a common personage. When he was buried, his little dog came to us. I suppose he remembered the hospitality he had received. Patty adopted him, and he was very faithful. Puss always looked on him with favour. I hoped during our rambles together in the following summer that he would lead us at last to the cave where Christmas-trees are dressed. But he never did.

“Our parents often spoke of his late master as ‘old Reuben,’ but children are not easily disabused of a favourite fancy, and in Patty’s thoughts and in mine the old man was long gratefully remembered as OLD FATHER CHRISTMAS.”

THE END.





