

OUR NOVEL

CHRISTMAS-TREE



CHAPTER I.

HOSE youngsters of ours were all agitating for a Christmas party. Of course, "Mother," being the weaker vessel, they attacked her first, and equally, of course, secured her as an ally. Father, being popularly supposed to be framed of sterner stuff, did not give in quite so easily. The paternal mind generally shrinks from anything that is suggestive of, metaphorically, "turning the house out of the windows," and the head of our family proved no exception to the rule.

All at once, on the 5th of January, he yielded, just when the elongated faces of the children showed that they were giving up hope; just, too, when they were within ten days or so of the end of the Christmas vacation. All our preparations must be made, our invitations sent out

as quickly as possible, and our party itself must be over in eight days; so we lost no time in beginning.

In several cases when we invited children, we told elder brothers and sisters what sort of gathering it would be, and that if they would join us we should be glad to see them. But it was distinctly understood that this was to be a "children's party," to begin and end within reasonable hours—namely, to commence at five and conclude at ten o'clock.

Most of our elder young friends seemed to like the idea of it very much, and declared there was nothing they enjoyed more than a juvenile party. So the result was that our party was a decidedly mixed one as regarded

ages, which commenced at eight and went up to anything you like to imagine.

"Now," said papa, when he had sent out our invitations, "how are you going to amuse the youngsters? You must have some definite plan; because if you simply bring together forty or fifty young people whom you know, but many of whom are unacquainted with each other, your gathering will be a failure."

"O yes," said one of the girls, "such parties are never pleasant. The rough ones romp about and often make things uncomfortable; and the shy, quiet, little people get into corners, enjoy nothing but the supper, and are glad when somebody comes to fetch them home."

My motherly experience corroborated this statement, and I agreed with papa that we must have a proper plan for our evening. We would write out a programme and adhere to it, but must first consider our resources, as we were resolved to have no professional aid in the way of "drawing-room magic" or "dissolving views."

"There are games, charades, music, and, papa, best of all, a Christmas-tree."

"What! when Christmas will be more than a fortnight old! What an unseasonable suggestion. Besides, you had your tree on Christmas Day, at the proper time, and I cannot pretend to give you a second edition."

"As though we wanted anything for ourselves when you have been so good already. But really, papa, a Christmas-tree is never out

of season, at least until the holidays are over, for nearly all the children's parties we go to are in January or quite at the end of December. People are too busy entertaining their own families at that time to trouble about outside friends until Christmas itself is actually over."

"Well, if your mother thinks she can manage it, I am agreeable," says papa, and goes off to the City after showers of kisses, and amid a chorus of thanks from the youngsters.

So games, charades, and a Christmas-tree were to be the component parts of our evening's amusement. But all these must be nicely arranged and fitted one into another, so that all might run smoothly, pleasantly, and punctually.

"What charades have you decided upon?" I inquired, and at this question the faces of the girls fell a little. True, charades had been a very favourite amusement during the long evenings. They and some schoolfellows who lived conveniently near, had spent many a play-hour in improvising word-pictures, which were often extremely amusing to the audience—namely, papa and myself.

Our children, I am thankful to say, always like us to be associated with them, even in their games, if possible, and I have never yet known what it was to see their faces brighten at the prospect of our leaving them for an evening to their own devices. When boys and girls begin to wish for the absence of the parents it is not a good sign, either for the young folks or their elders.

When these word-pictures were going on, as soon as the first syllable was ready, a deputation would proceed to the dining-room to escort us into the play-room, where, from the "reserved seats"—a sofa—we might be entertained by the performance, and have our minds exercised in guessing the word.

A "school scene" was almost sure to occur in each charade. And how severe was the youngster who played teacher! And how woefully stupid were her pupils!

I noticed, too, that the little girls always preferred *very grown-up parts*, especially such as could only be properly represented in long dresses; and that to be attired in one of mine which had rather an extra "tail" to it gave peculiar satisfaction.

Of course my own wardrobe was regularly rummaged, and everything, from a dressing gown upwards, put into requisition. But the children really did no harm to anything, and it was part



of the bargain that every article should be put back tidily into its place, even to chairs and tables, so that neither mamma nor servants might be vexed by clothing or rooms left at sixes and sevens.

However pleasant and droll these improvised charades might be, it was evident we should want to get up something with a little more care to please a number of young guests, and the girls had been searching their books of games for a suitable charade, but in vain. When I asked what was chosen, the reply was not quite a cheery one.

"There are charades enough, mamma," said Mary, "but some of them want a great many preparations, and are too much like 'plays' to please papa and you. Others have such very long, learned words in them that they are quite unsuitable for children, and though nice to read, would be very difficult to commit to memory."

"Then what do you propose in place of charades?"

"O, mamma, we must not give them up; but couldn't you write one for us?" she added this *very coaxingly*.

This suggestion was rapidly seconded and carried by the juveniles, whose elasticity of conscience in expecting one to do such a thing on such short notice, could only be surpassed by their unlimited faith in the maternal powers.

I considered a moment, and then said, "I will try what I can do," a reply which called forth clappings of hands, hugs, and a species of wild Indian dance executed around me by the juveniles then assembled, who seemed to think their difficulties were at an end.

CHAPTER II.

OUR PREPARATION.



WE first of all laid our heads together and wrote our programme, which ran as follows:—

January 13th.

5 P.M.—Tea and coffee in hall.

6.—Games in breakfast-room, music in drawing-room.

6.45.—First charade in drawing-room; to be followed by recitations, music, and singing, games in breakfast-room, after the charade is concluded, and until supper.

8.30.—Supper in dining-room.

9.30.—Christmas-tree in drawing-room.

10 to 10.30.—"Good-night."

We bought fifty little forms for writing the programmes upon, and the children did this very quickly and neatly, and put them carefully away until the evening, when they would be required.

We had asked our guests for five o'clock, but we calculated that fully an hour would be occupied in dispensing tea and coffee amongst them, and making them acquainted with each other; that some would like the merry games, and others music and quieter amusements. So these were to go on at the same time, but in different rooms, without any clashing, the youngsters passing from one to another as inclination prompted.

I want in this chapter to tell you about our Christmas-tree, and to show any young folk who may not know how to manage such a thing that it may be done easily, inexpensively, and in such a manner as to please guests of various ages, and yet without introducing any elements that the most "particular" of parents could object to.

Fortunately our Christmas-day-tree was still standing in the pot, though a great many of the leaves were off, owing to the warmth of the room in which it had stood.

It was a tall, well-shaped fir, which reached nearly to the top of the dining-room. Even in its present condition it would be very useful, as I had determined on turning a triangular slice of the drawing-room into a little winter scene; so I shook off all loose leaves, and then watered the tree with a watering-pot until it was dripping. Then, whilst it was still damp, with a large basin of flour and a dredging-box, I floured it all over.

When this was done, the tree looked very pretty, just as if it were covered with snow; and being floured whilst it was damp, the flour did not fall off again, except where it was very thick. A gentle shake took off what might have otherwise dropped on the carpets during conveyance upstairs.

(N.B.—Always be as *neat* as possible, even in arranging for games. As the little rhyme says: "let putting away be part of the play." It encourages us fathers and mothers to give our girls and boys as much pleasure as we can, when it does not cause needless work for grumbling servants.)

We wished the tree could have remained just as it looked after the night's frost; for, owing to the shower-bath it had undergone there were dear little glittering icicles from every bough, but we were obliged to have these melted off in a warmer atmosphere before it went upstairs.

Beside this *white* tree, we had two other young firs and some plants; but these were not floured, as a great number of little ornamental articles were fastened to the boughs. On the white tree were only lights—little coloured candles which can be bought in half-pound boxes, and there are now suitable candlesticks, with tiny springs which clip the boughs and fasten in a moment, keeping their places much better than the old sort did.

These will last year after year, and as we had procured several dozens before Christmas, we had no need to include them in our pur-

chases. But we needed a number of articles, so we took a morning for shopping.

Here is our list of requisites, though, as I have told you, we had some in hand; but I must make it complete for the guidance of those who may this winter do what we did last year:—

Young fir tree or trees, according to space available for snow-scene.

At least three dozens of candlesticks and candles.

As many little articles for the tree as you have guests.

Two pieces of white cotton wadding.

This may be purchased at about four shillings the piece of a dozen yards, and we had the quantity named; but, if *only* a small space is available, less would do.

Four or six ounces of pounded glass, called "frost." It is the thing you often see on those Christmas Cards which glitter, as if frozen, and, though made of glass, it does not cut your fingers when you pick it up.

Beside the articles intended for presents, such things as little banners, balls of coloured glass, china dolls, and any light ornaments that can be mustered will be required, and these must be fastened to the boughs. I bought, amongst other things, twelve pretty little coloured glass kettles, filled with perfume, for half-a-crown; and these were very effective for hanging on the trees, and required no fastening with wire.

A little bunch of snowdrops—these may be either real or imitation, according to circumstances. Two remnants of tinselled gauze, one white, the other black, and each about two yards in length. One dozen of imitation silver buttons.

I had to arrange the dresses for four characters. Father Christmas, Snow, Frost, and Fog, who were to be associated with our Christmas Tree. Now, about the first there was no difficulty. For his long flowing robe we utilised a new scarlet flannel dressing-gown, with the addition of a belt, collar, cuffs, and large square pockets covered with cotton wadding.

We hired a flowing wig and beard of snowy whiteness, added a wreath of holly, artificial to spare the prickles—it cost threepence, and was rich in berries—a staff with a bough of fir tied to the top and twisted round with cotton wadding, and the costume of Father Christmas was complete.

It sounds very unpoetical; but Father Christmas's staff was a broom-stick—long, straight, and strong, which the youngsters borrowed from the kitchen, and honourably restored when done with.

Snow's dress was made of cotton wadding, and was cut out, fitted, and made in two hours. I cut a lining of coarse book muslin, the shape of a child's princess pinafore, but enlarged to fit a girl of *thirteen*, who was to be "Snow." On this I placed cotton wadding—the real dress material, stitched up the seams inside as slightly as possible with the sewing-machine, and put in sleeves three quarters length. Then I hemmed by hand, and *vee* slightly, each *side of the front*—which was open from top to bottom—and the bottoms of the sleeves, and put a band round the throat.

On the left side the imitation silver buttons were placed—the button-holes were very small, and only cut, not worked. The bottom of the dress was not hemmed, or the seams felled, and if a stitch showed through anywhere it was only necessary to ruffle the surface of the wadding and it was covered. We did this down the back and side seams, so that the dress looked just like unbroken snow.

The white silver tinsel gauze made a glittering sash, tied at one side, and little platings for neck and wrists.

The cap or turban had for its foundation part of the paper in which our parcel of wadding had been wrapped. A round of paper—six thicknesses—doing duty for cardboard, and giving a better effect, formed the crown, and a strip, two inches wide, the brim, both covered with cotton wadding. The brim was sewed, outside, to the crown—the stitches hidden, as in the dress, and joined at one side. The seam, or rather joining, was covered by a little bunch of snowdrops, fastened with an imitation silver brooch and tassel. Another little bunch of snowdrops was also held by a silver brooch at the throat of the dress, and a little necklet of imitation coins formed a pretty finish.

But Snow's dress was not quite complete. We wanted it to sparkle as well as to look white, so we touched it and the cap here and there very carefully with white liquid gum, and sprinkled it with the frost or powdered glass, and left it to dry.

The effect of this dress in the gas-light was most beautiful, and those not in the secret thought it was made of fine white fur. I need hardly add that shoes and stockings were white, and that a fair child should represent Snow.

All these silver ornaments may be done without, though they look pretty, and a few more snowdrops substituted. But, as silver is so much used now, there are few houses in which it is not to be found, and mammas or elder sisters will always help the young folks by lending the needful ornaments. If purchased in imitation silver, the brooches cost sixpence each, the necklet—quite a beauty—eighteen pence.

Our Frost was a boy of ten. For him we made a little blouse of black tinsel gauze—no fells or bottom hems, but put together lightly, and buttoning at the throat; leather belt and satchel liberally frosted, steel buckles, and buttons. For the head an old Scotch cap, gummied all over, and then so frosted that you could not tell what it was made of; with a rook's feather at the side, fastened by a steel clasp. For the steel clasps any very common ones will do, or anything that glitters may be substituted, such as glass, only it must suit the other articles. We happened to have good cut steel ones.

As to Fog, he only requires a long veil of any half-transparent material that will allow him to be dimly seen through it.

Frost's satchel was filled with small articles for presents, and a large carpet bag, and sundry parcels duly labelled, "Father Christmas, passenger," held the larger gifts.

All these things were ready, and put carefully aside, and as our party was to assemble on Monday, we prepared our little scene on

Saturday in one corner of the drawing-room. We made a rocky background with all sorts of odds and ends, a log or two, and a small empty tea-chest, helped, I remember, our object being to make it as up and down as we could. These things we covered with cotton wadding, which also carpeted the triangular portion of the floor that was to be snowy. On this the trees were placed; the tall white one with the tapers, in the corner, the others decorated and more to the front. Then all were sprinkled with the powdered glass and we had a beautiful little snow scene around our Christmas Tree.

When papa saw our preparations and heard that Father Christmas, Frost, Snow, and Fog, were to be represented, he wanted to have a finger in the business, and said, "Cannot you find something for me to do?"

The children, of course, insisted that the sight of their finery had excited his envy,

Somehow all was done in good time, and the youngsters mastered their parts, though there was only one MS. for them all to join at. On Saturday evening we had a full-dress rehearsal, and found that all went well.

I should not forget to say that the presents were labelled beforehand with the names of the guests, and that Father Christmas had a list to refer to as they were given out by Frost and Snow or by himself.

We took great care to arrange the dresses and every article required or likely to be wanted so that, when the children stole away from the supper table, the dressing might be accomplished very quickly, and the youngsters be ready to appear by the time their guests were seated in the room. Great caution was also observed in lighting the tapers, so that no spark might fall on the wadding carpet, and as the one illuminated tree was in the back-ground, there was no danger to the children from

the many candles on the lower branches. (The candles should be thick enough to last more than half an hour, and some one should be deputed to take special notice of their condition, and to extinguish them at the proper time.)

An easy chair was placed near the snow-scene, and facing the audience, and a table with refreshments, which a servant was ready to supply, stood near the door. These little matters completed "our preparations."

Father Christmas was represented by a tall girl of fourteen, who wore spectacles.

Snow.—A girl of thirteen.

Frost.—A boy of ten.

Fog.—A boy of any age you like who can speak in a thick and grumpy voice. Our Fog was a young lady.

Host.—Papa.

Hostess.—Mamma.

These two parts could be taken equally well by a girl and boy dressed in grown-up garments, and looking as old as possible.

(To be Continued.)



WAITING TO BE FED.

and that he wanted to be "dressed up," which he protested was an undeserved accusation—he was merely pleased to see how nicely and simply things were managed and he wanted to be useful, if he could, and, if mother could contrive a part for him. In consequence of this it was agreed that papa and I, in our natural places as master and mistress of the house, should have a few words to say in order to make the whole affair seem more homely and real.

I can hardly tell you how or when, during that busy week, the lines were composed to suit our characters. I just had pencil and paper at hand and scribbled bits down as they came into my head. More than once papa grumbled at being waked up by the striking of a match, and the sudden lighting of gas in the night time, in order that a happy thought might not be lost or vanish in the land of dreams.

as are now left to us. I say such as are left, for no doubt both town and country girls have noticed how few birds there are about, and how silent the fields and woods have seemed to be this year in comparison with former ones.

It would take up many pages to tell the stories of bird-distress, famine, and death from starvation which took place during last winter's long frost. I was in the English Lake district in the summer, and there I was told how the songbirds were found dead in all directions.

"The fruit hangs on the trees untouched except by human hands, and last year we could hardly get a ripe cherry from that large tree," said a lady friend to me. "This summer I have not seen a single black-bird, and the only uninvited visitor that has shared with us is the little brown fellow yonder," pointing to a bushy-tailed squirrel

HOW WE SAVED THE POOR BIRDS IN THE WINTER.

Now that the cold weather has set in, I should like to interest every young reader of the GIRL'S OWN PAPER on behalf of the birds, so that something may be done to preserve such of our dear little feathered friends