

## REMINISCENCES OF CHRISTMAS

By AN ANGLO CANADIAN.



one of the numerous suburbs of London, where so many tasteful and pretty villas abound, I was once the guest in a small household during the Christmas week; and pleasant indeed were the days I passed, sometimes running up to town to select some little offering for one of my friends, or working at the finishing stitches of some fine piece of fancy work, to add to the numerous gifts. My friend had a large party gathered under her small roof, and for each of them some trifle was made or bought; also each of the servants was to be a recipient of a gift, for in English homes none are forgotten, from the least to the greatest, at that glad season; and I looked in amazement as parcel after parcel arrived, and wondered how and where they were all to be distributed; and I was more puzzled than ever when my friend said: "Now I must get the greengrocer to give me a nice clean hamper and cord."

Well, we went to church on the Christmas morning, and heard a delightful sermon preached by the vicar; he dwelt long and lovingly on Christ's own childhood, and ended up by saying Christmas was the children's day, and that all should join in trying to make the day happy to them, that they might therefore be brought to love Christ the more. I grieved over the fact that there were no children in our party, and wondered how my friend would feel at the constant mention of the little ones, not knowing that she was deeply interested in a young fatherless and motherless lad, and had long promised him, if he did well at school, that at some future time she would give him a watch, and she had already invited him to join in our evening's festivity. I might have known her loving nature would not be content till she found some young person to brighten

us up, and upon whom she could shower her loving kindness; and after our dinner, which was an excellent one, had been partaken of, and ore and all had drunk to the health of our absent friends, we returned to the drawing-room, and there found the little lad smilingly awaiting us.

Having quietly sipped our coffee, and enjoyed a little music, we were suddenly aroused by one of those loud and solemn single knocks that come so unawares to strangers unused to London ways, and directly a maid entered, and said: "If you please, ma'am, there is a carrier at the door with a hamper for you," and my friend smilingly asked her guests, as it was Christmas time, might she bring it in and open it there? and one replied, "Indeed, yes; it is a pleasant surprise for you to get a Christmas hamper so late; and you had better open it at once, for no doubt it is fruit or game from the country." But I had my doubts. I thought it looked strongly like *the hamper* with its green cord that I had noted a few days since. My friend said nothing, but asked the servant to bring her a knife, and, throwing off the lid, displayed innumerable white and brown parcels; and even then few understood that each in the room had a treasure packed away somewhere in the depths of the basket till our friend began to distribute them.

One gentleman got the most lovely knitted silk socks, tied down in a charming little toy hamper so closely with blue ribbons that he never thought of looking into it to see what lay beneath, till some elderly lady said, "Untie the ribbons," and as he did so there lay the pretty soft silk socks; the colour rose into his face as he glanced with a pleased look across to a kindly-looking young lady who sat with her unopened gift in her hand. Her parcel was so tiny that surely nothing but some valuable gem could be inside it; and so it was, for I caught just one glimpse of it, and it shone like gold, and she looked happy.

Our little school-boy, who had stood near the hamper all this time, and handed each parcel as the name was read out, was in a great state of excitement. I had watched his fine open countenance, and his soft grey eyes open with expectancy, as package after package passed through his hands and none came for him. He eyed every little parcel more earnestly than the last, and presently his name was called. But alas! it was a large, bulky package—no precious watch for him this Christmas. But all the same, boy-like, he had soon torn off the wrappings. But behold! inside was another parcel, and that was addressed to his friend; and when she had thrown that aside, there was another, this time with my name upon it; and so it changed hands many times, but at last came back to its first owner, and throwing down the last brown paper, a good sized wooden box was displayed, and the lad's face fell

more and more as he pulled out wool and paper and paper and wool, till at the very bottom was found a wee case, and opening it, with a cry of joy he held up high above his head the long-wished-for watch! There was a sound of kisses and smothered laughter, and my poor friend was being hugged till she had to cry for mercy.

The servants, who had been told to remain in the room, and had stood together at the door, had each received a gift most suitable, besides all of them getting a sealed envelope, which, from the shape and apparent weight of it, I concluded contained at least five shillings; and one of the maids whispered to me as she passed: "Oh, ma'am, is not the mistress most kind?" And I most heartily agreed with her, for was I not so laden with all sorts of gifts that when at last our gay evening was over I could scarcely climb the stairs to my comfortable bedroom? but when once there stood long looking into the glowing coals, and chanting quietly to myself an old poem that I had once learned as a child of "The Merry Homes of England." And I do not know where my stupid thoughts might have led me if one of my pretty gifts had not fallen from my arms, and in my efforts to save it from the fire recalled my wandering thoughts to the present; and I was not long in getting into my nice warm bed, when I was soon sent fast asleep by the jangling of the Christmas chimes.

Another Christmas, and the sun had just set in one of our small Canadian villages, leaving a trail of beautiful colours behind it on the usual grey-tinted sky of evening, and the one village street was just being lighted with its oil lamps, which burnt most dimly, and were at best few and far between. But though the lights were dim the hearts were light, for it was Christmas Eve. In the little wooden church, by the dim light of a few lanterns and an odd lamp, a number of young people were sticking here and there, in holes bored in the different seats, small branches of the mountain ash, with their scarlet berries, and two or three of the most venturesome spirits had gone so far as to put a few bits in the corners of the sombre old pulpit. But much decoration was deemed unseemly, and not allowed in those primitive times. In the vestry beyond were assembled the doctor's young son, a stalwart young butcher, and a short, bald-headed old man, who on ordinary days mended the villagers' boots and shoes, but who at this time was bringing forth the most doleful groans from a big bass viol in his efforts to keep time with the above-named young gentlemen, who were practising their respective parts in the Psalms and hymn tunes on a flute and violin. These, with a few young girls' voices, comprised the choir; but to-night the young maidens were too busy to join them, and only peeped in as they passed to and fro bearing their little branches to their destination.

In the little frame cottages the mothers were more or less busy preparing the good things for the week, for these kindly people laid in such a store of cakes and pies as would astonish ordinary mortals nowadays. There was the great stone oven to be heated for the dozen of pumpkin pies, and how recklessly the golden cream had been stirred in now but the good mother knew, for had she not a fine brindled cow of her own? and the pies must be extra good this Christmas time, when all the children would be coming home. Then the turkey was well stuffed with savory herbs that she had picked and dried out of her

own nice garden, the apple-cream placed in the big glass dish, and the pudding tied ready for the pot. I was watching our good housewife as she went back and forth in her spotless kitchen, when suddenly I heard the light flying steps of children, and two young creatures, a boy of about five years of age and a little girl of seven, came in so covered with snow that but for their rosy cheeks and chattering tongues I should have taken them for two snow images. They had been out with their sled, as they called it; and had tumbled from it so often in their sliding down hill that all their garments had a firm coating of the glistening snow. As each laid aside comforter, cap, and hood, I saw that the boy had curly brown hair, but the girl's wavy locks were as fair as her face almost, and you could see that she had a sensitive, clinging nature, and I could not help wondering what her future might be. Well, they sat themselves down by the great kitchen fire, where a pot hung on a long crook, or crane, full of boiling lard, waiting for the few remaining crullers to be dropped in it. A great platter of the crisp brown doughnuts was already on the table, which the children eyed so lovingly that their mother gave them each one, and, telling them to go to bed, said—

"For you know, dears, that Christkindchen never comes to fill the stockings of the good little children till they are all asleep."

Then you should have seen the awe that stole into the little girl's face as she turned her fluffy head, and looking up into the broad chimney, said—

"Christkindchen! Christkindchen! we have been good; please put something nice into our stockings, but be very careful of the fire when you come down, or it will burn you."

And Christkindchen heard her and came carefully down, for in the morning both children's stockings were full. But you little people nowadays, who have so many toys, gay picture books, and French sweets, and no end of valuable gifts besides, will laugh when

I tell you what trifles gave those little ones of that household long ago so much pleasure. First, in the toes of the little stockings were a few sticks of candy, twisted tightly in paper, a package of blanched almonds, and raisins, and a dolly made of the doughnuts, with allspice eyes, cloves for ears and nose, and a raisin for the mouth; this was prized the most, and carried about all day; and I saw tears shed when one was broken, though comfort was found afterwards in a degree by the eating of it.

One more Christmas and I have done. This time I was in old London again, and it seemed busier and more full than ever—big folk, little folk, fat folk, thin folk, all seeming to vie with each other as to which could hurry over the ground the fastest. There seemed only one place in all that vast city where anyone stood still or where quiet reigned, and that was opposite the Marylebone Soup Kitchen, where groups of emaciated men, a few bedraggled and wan-looking women, and poor little ragged, shivering children, sat upon the curbstone, or leaned against the side of the building or a lamp post, waiting till some belated passer-by would of their plenty give them a penny to get a basin of soup. I had already given away a number of tickets to the man in charge of the place, but it being Christmas Eve, my heart was very pitiful toward the poor hungry creatures, though I had been told that the men were mostly drunkards, who only came there when they had no pence for the public-house. But as I passed along on the pavement I saw a poor little boy crouching near the wall to shield himself from the wind, looking so cold and miserable, and crying bitterly; so I spoke to him and gave him a sixpence. But just as I gave it to him, a tall, gaunt man reached his hand over us and snatched it from him, and before I had quite realised what had happened he had rushed at a mad pace quite out of sight. I was with a friend who knew more of the ways of London than I did, so she urged me to come away at once, or she said we would be mobbed, as by this time several grimy hands were extended in suppli-

cation to me; so I walked rather quickly, to be out of their way. But I earnestly hoped some braver spirit than mine would see that the poor little child got his supper before the night fairly closed in. It was very hard to think that in the very midst of such great wealth and comfort hundreds of poor creatures lay cold and unfed when such a trifle would help them.

Christmas morning came, but no bright sun awakened me, for it was foggy; and as we walked to church the fog seemed to penetrate even through our warm cloaks. We found the gas burning in the street, and though all lighted in the church, it seemed very poor and dim. But I forgot all about it in the beautiful service and grand singing, for I supposed the day would clear up later; but instead of doing so the fog became more dense than ever. As we walked home I could not but congratulate myself that I had not to go out to get my Christmas dinner, though several friends were to dine with us. As the hour for dinner approached we observed an anxious look upon the faces of the servants as they came and went about the house. We waited an hour, then another, for our expected guests, and after all our small party of three had to sit down alone; and we even could not have the satisfaction of grumbling, for there was the solemn footman handing dish after dish with as much solemnity as if our eight stranger guests were all there. It was bad indeed for us, but our poor friends had the worst of it, for they all had made the effort to come, and had driven round and round in the pitch darkness of the terrible fog, the gentlemen having even got out of their carriages and carried lights before the coachman. But all to no purpose, for at ten o'clock they found themselves back in the near neighbourhood of their own homes, and were thankful to refresh themselves with cold beef and mutton, and whatever good thing might be found in the larder. But as for a merry Christmas, few had really had it, for the elements had conspired together to prevent it; and almost all the dinner parties on that Christmas day ended more or less as ours had done.

## POLITE ANSWERS TO IMPERTINENT QUESTIONS.

FEW of us would quite agree with Victor Cherbuliez when, speaking through the mouth of one of his characters, he tells us that "Rien n'est plus impertinent qu'une question, car répondre est toujours une fatigue et souvent un embarras"—"Nothing is more impertinent than a question—answering it is always fatiguing, and frequently embarrassing."

Too often, with persons of scanty ideas and meagre power of expressing themselves, a running fire of questions is the only way of keeping up conversation, while even with our greatest men, intelligent questions happily put have been known to act as an intellectual stimulus, and to issue in such brilliant outpourings as the world would not willingly lose.

At the same time, it is an indisputable fact that in our journey through life we are constantly exposed to a great many questions which are distinctly offensive. Unfortunately, too, it is not only with persons who are deficient in breeding, and strangers to the niceties of social life, that such questions are matter of daily occurrence—they may be put unwittingly by the very politest of people.

It is therefore of no little importance, if we would avoid on the one hand answering these questions, and on the other transgressing any of the laws of courtesy, that we should give some little thought to the different methods of dealing

with these objectionable experiences. It is easy enough, perhaps, to avoid answering an impertinent question when the circumstances are such that a polite snub is not undesirable or inadmissible. But when the necessity for refusing to answer coexists with a strong desire not to offend, then the difficulties in the way are very considerable. So indeed they are in those cases where the question has been prompted by no malicious feeling, and where it would seriously discompose the guiltless blunderers if their *gaucherie* were made evident.

Railery sometimes affords a valuable means of escape from the difficulties of the position, as when, for instance, one lady having been asked by another where she had bought her delicious fish, replied that she hadn't bought it at all. "The fishmonger, when he heard you were coming to lunch, presented it to me. Unlike Dr. Faustus, my fishmonger absolutely refused to sell his sole (soul)." As a matter of fact, the much lauded fish had come off the truck of an itinerant vendor of "Mackerel all alive, oh!" but motives of false shame made the lady interrogated dislike to avow this.

Everyone is familiar with the nursery formula for dealing with any indiscreet query as to a person's age. But people who would scarcely care to answer that they were as old

as their tongue and a little older than their teeth might with advantage borrow a hint from the young married woman, whose precise age had been a subject of much discussion before some friend, more daring than the rest, hazarded a point blank enquiry—"How old are you?" "How old am I!" she echoed gaily; "let me see. Why, with my new bonnet and best gown on I am only seventeen. On the other hand, when I swathe myself in a shiny mackintosh, and poise a deerstalker's cap on the back of my head, I am not a day younger than fifty. My actual age, as you know, is somewhere between those limits."

One other way of dealing lightly with this question as to age, when it is a woman who is victimised by it, is to say laughingly—"Oh, we women are supposed to be only as old as we look. You do not need to ask me, therefore; you have simply to look at me." Yet another way, likely to be popular with those who rejoice in a good French accent, and are pleased at any opportunity of displaying it, is to rattle off some appropriate French quotation, prefacing it with the statement that you don't see why people should ever want to know anybody's age, since—

"Aux âmes bien nées,  
La valeur n'attend point le nombre des  
années";