

HOME DECORATIONS FOR CHRISTMAS.

HOW shall we decorate the house for Christmas? I think we might diverge somewhat from the old-fashioned ways, and introduce a few improvements, and add a little variety to these decorations. We might ornament our rooms in a more artistic style than is generally our wont.

True, we shall have to spend much more time on our work, but "a thing that is worth doing at all is worth doing well." The old custom is to deck walls and windows with sprigs of evergreens—sprigs and twigs which look uncommonly stiff and uncomfortable, and which spend their time in falling off the tops of picture-frames, and tumbling out of windows, and suddenly precipitating themselves from gaseliers. We will decorate in a more satisfactory way, if you please.

Now, I am going to suggest to you a good many plans for home decorations, but I shall not pretend to advise, or to declare which is the best mode, for that would be simply impossible. Much of the choice depends upon the style of your house—whether it is an old-fashioned structure or one of modern erection—and, again, whether your supply of evergreens is abundant or scanty. If you live in a town, it will seem a mockery to advise you to make wreaths by the dozen yards; and if your home stands in a garden well planted with shrubs, you will perhaps scoff at suggestions which will prove valuable to those who are not rich in the possession of evergreens.

I know that holly wreaths and mistletoe boughs are considered to be the orthodox, and perhaps the only legitimate, materials for use on this occasion, and I should certainly introduce green leaves into every decoration; but it may not be always practicable to confine ourselves exclusively to the use of anything in particular.

It will be best for me first to enumerate what you can make, and after that to offer some hints as to where and how you can place these various decorations. Perhaps

you will be offended if I ask whether you can manufacture a wreath. A simple work it appears to be—merely fastening evergreens on to a string. It is true that is all there is to do; but even for this simple task dexterous fingers are required to weave home decorations.

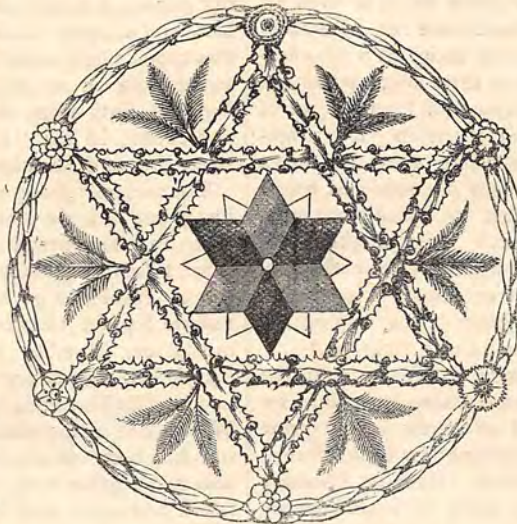
In a large building, clumsy workmanship is not discernible; and it is a matter of little or no consequence if here and there a piece of string does show itself, or if the garland is rather thick in one part and somewhat bare in another; but in our rooms these defects are eyesores. Wreaths should be made to look round, full, neat; and, moreover, they ought to be made firm enough to be handled and put into their places without fear of a catastrophe.

Take a long piece of thick string, or thin cord, and tie one end of it to the door-handle, or some object which will hold it secure. Have some fine wire or thin string (I prefer the latter) at hand, and any number of small sprigs of evergreens. Place two or three

on the cord, and then twist the wire round the bare stems; then lay one or two over the fixture, and again twine the wire round. The work is more expeditiously done when the cord is stretched tightly over a space, and fastened at both ends; but then the wreath is apt to be flat underneath instead of being equally full all round. This does not so much matter if it is destined to adorn a flat surface—if it is to go round a doorway, or be in any position of that kind—but it is very detrimental to the appearance of festoons or garlands that hang detached. If you are

new to the work, you will be astonished to find what an immense number of pieces of holly and box are consumed by this style of decoration.

I would specially recommend you to wear gloves while engaged in this work, for there lurks poison in the holly, and if it finds an entrance into your veins, then I pity you, poor creature, for what you will suffer; too well I know what you will have to go through, for did I not myself endure much from neglecting to obey



this warning? The frost was severe; a small crack in the skin let in the enemy, and that most useful member of the hand, the thumb, did no service for the writer during a long six months.

And now the wreath is made; and though its leaves are bright and shining, yet its hues are sombre. It will look very well in the hall or staircase. The next can be more cheerful, as bunches of red berries can be put in, at short intervals; or, if the birds have run off with the berries, as sometimes they are greedy enough to do, then we can have recourse to the red and yellow everlasting flowers, which are sent over in such quantities from Germany, and are used extensively for this and such-like purposes.

Paperflowers give a bright and cheerful look, but for myself I do not like to see them introduced, except for some special evening entertainment. Seen by daylight, they are apt to give a tawdry look to the whole, but at night they are particularly ornamental.

In arranging these flowers in the wreaths, the placing of the different colours should be taken into consideration, not because of a possible disagreement, but because their powers of reflecting light are by no means uniform; thus, blue is lost in the distance before red, and yellow is seen at a distance at which red would disappear. Colours, however, do not decline in force so much by height as by horizontal distance; the reason of this being that the upper atmosphere is less dense and clouded with vapour.

We need not go any further into the science of colour; thus much is necessary, because the wreaths

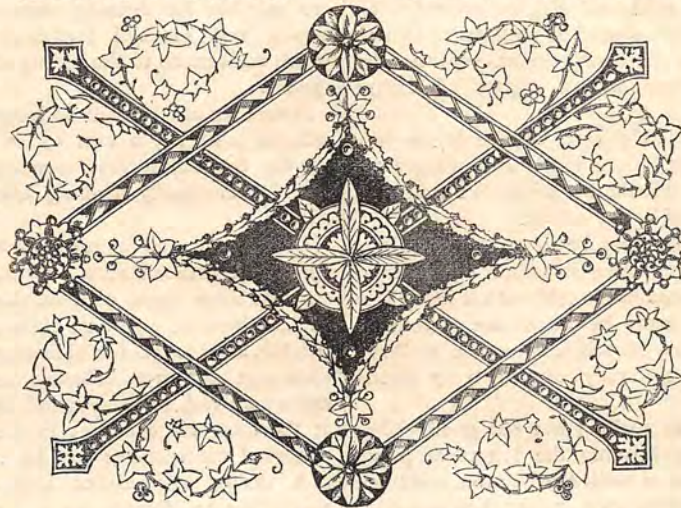
will still look dull if white and yellow flowers are not frequently interspersed with others of less reflective power.

One more device by which to brighten up the leaves; and to gain this effect a visit must first be paid to some glass works, where must be begged or bought a few ounces of ground glass. This is a miscellaneous mixture of bits of all colours which fall to the ground when the glass is cut. Brush gum over the leaves, and scatter the powdered glass on to them. The cost of the artifice is trifling; the effect is magical. The wreath sparkles and glitters with many-coloured hues in the most radiant manner.

In lieu of wreaths, which are sometimes too heavy and cumbersome a style of decoration, long tendrils of ivy twined round or trained along look light and elegant; a good substitute will also be found in bands formed of leaves only, stripped from the stalk. I grant you that the sewing on of each separate leaf is a severe trial of patience, especially if those selected are the prickly holly,

whose points invariably catch the thread every time the needle draws it through; or the diminutive box, which seems to retard our work by the minuteness of itself and its fellows.

The leaves are sewed on to strips of Turkey red cotton, or white calico, and serve either as a panelling tracery, where the room is wainscotted, or as a frame or bordering for various devices. For instance, it would be a sad oversight if we forgot to put up in some form or other that customary old greeting to all who



enter our homes: "A Merry Christmas—A Happy New Year;" and when we have expressed the wish in a visible form, we can make no more suitable border for it than that of green leaves. How shall the letters be formed? Either by illuminating colours, the use of paper rosettes, or of rice.

May I offer you a few suggestions about your illumination?—for I presume you wish to be correct in the details. These hints do not refer to any design in particular, but to all in general. Supposing you intend to make the letters in gold, and wish the ground to be coloured, then the letters should be outlined in black; if you would reverse the arrangement, separate the letters from the ground by an edging of darker colour.

Dark letters on a light ground require to be outlined with a darker tint. Coloured letters on a ground of contrasting colour should be separated from the ground by an edging of lighter colour.

These few terse rules may be of service, for to a novice the art of illuminating is rather bewildering, for you see the effect cannot be told until it is too late to alter any mistake made in the choice of colours, and we are all so busy at this season that we have absolutely no time to study any art very attentively.

The second mode of spelling out our good wishes to all mankind, is by forming the letters of paper rosettes. Take a piece of twilled red cotton, and trace plain unornamental letters upon it, and then fasten on the rosettes at regular intervals.

These rosettes want dainty fingers to make them, but if they are neatly constructed the effect is really excellent; and there is considerable choice at command, for the letters may be made to look as of ivory or carved oak, of silver or gold; but for this special object, ivory letters on a red ground, bordered with laurel-leaves, appear the best.

Long ago rice was used in imitation of carved ivory, and it is by no means a despicable device, and one which will serve in good stead if you are not an adept in rosette-work. Cut out plain letters in cardboard, of such a width that two grains of rice placed end to end, diagonally, will cover it. The large-grained Carolina rice is the kind you require. Wash it several times, but not so as to soften it; then rub it dry in a towel, and, aided by a knitting-pin, put on the grains end to end, diagonally, in such close succession as will entirely hide the cardboard framework. Very strong gum is needed to make the rice adhere.

The letters are fastened on to a groundwork of red baize, and here again a bordering of leaves of ivy, laurel, or box will give the required finish to the whole.

It is so much the fashion nowadays to have a multiplicity of mural decorations, especially in our drawing-rooms, that I should suggest geometrical tracings for this purpose. These can be formed in outline of flat bands of leaves, the inner part to be in coloured ground of red or blue, with a monogram in the centre,

or some other small device formed of rice or composed of very wee ivory rosettes. Or the outside border may be made of stiff cardboard, which having been covered over with thin red unglazed paper, can be then studded with small rosettes, and the centre part filled in with evergreen leaves.

There are some very handsome everlasting flowers which come to us from the Cape, and of which extremely pretty round wreaths can be made, by which I mean a circlet of flowers with no centre; these are suitable for drawing-room ornaments; there is also a very graceful feather-grass, *Stipa pennata*, which adds much to the beauty of drawing-room decorations.

Before we can be said to have concluded our subject, we must pay a visit to the staircase, for this is usually the object first seen on entrance, and one that is continually meeting our eye throughout the day.

One of our most eminent architects considers that our ordinary staircase is a very dull thing; he says that our neat stone steps, with moulded nosings, stuck by one end into the wall, and cleverly notched one upon another, and brought to a nice smooth slope underneath, with neat cast-iron balusters and French-polished mahogany rail, screwed round like a cornu-ammonis at the foot, are excellent in their way, and a time-honoured contrivance; but he complains that there is a sleepy, self-satisfied look about it which one would like to disturb—as if its only duty were to show you the way to bed. Let us give it a fillip, and make it look more lively. Shall we see what we can do?

Have you room in your passage to allow of a bank of evergreens being introduced? Then I will tell you how to make one; it will quite transform the appearance of the staircase which has met with such censure from high quarters. Get some wire netting and rear it up outside the staircase. If your space will allow, do not place the network quite upright, but bring it forward at the base; the greater the incline, the more natural will the artificial bank look; if you put a tack here and there, and hitch the wire over, it will keep its place; you can also take it round the obnoxious "cornu-ammonis;" in the holes of the netting put middling-sized sprigs of evergreen, and in this way completely cover the framework. You have only to push the stems of small branches into the holes; no fastening is requisite to keep them there.

In conclusion, I will give one broad hint as to the choice of decorations. The style chosen for dining-room, library, and hall, should differ in character from that which is introduced into the drawing or breakfast-room. The decorations for the former should be somewhat heavy and ponderous, important and consequential in their general aspect; while those which gain an entrance into the latter must be of quite a different stamp; their outward appearance is required to be delicately neat, veritably elegant, and innately refined.