

I literally bounded on my seat.

"And you have been advising him against it?"

Miss Ashley smiled, and with a grand backward sweep of her hand, "Hush! hush!" she said. "My dear child, my dear little Mary, if you only knew how childish this impulsiveness of yours is—this rushing to conclusions! Can't you be calm for a few moments? can't you wait till I have spoken?"

I coloured, and my head drooped. I felt I had been ridiculous.

"Far be it from me," went on Miss Ashley superbly, "to use my influence against generous and noble deeds. Your father wishes to adopt this poor orphan"—I suppose I am ultra-sensitive; I did not like these words "poor orphan," as applied to our Nina—"let him do as he desires," she proceeded, with another magnificent wave of the hand, "only," emphatically, "let the thing be entered upon wisely; let every one concerned have their eyes open; count the cost; let there be no concealments, no slightest occasion for future recriminations."

Generally a puzzle to me, Miss Ashley was that day more puzzling than ever, but warned by previous defeats I guarded myself from indignant excitement.

"I don't know what you mean by concealments," I said wearily, "and as to recriminations, who is to recriminate? and what are they to recriminate about?"

"Mary, my dear child," said Miss Ashley, "your simplicity is adorable, your father should be proud of possessing your confidence so entirely. But that is all the more reason that you should not be put upon. Tell me now frankly—as between woman and woman—do you know anything about your cousin?"

"I know that she is the daughter of my father's dead sister."

"Nothing more?"

"What more is necessary?"

"My sweet little innocent! your cousin had a father."

"Her father is dead."

"But who and what was he?"

"He was a good man or my aunt would not have loved him."

"Mary, you are too fond of platitudes; it is absurd besides to answer a question of fact with a statement of feeling. I ask you—I have your father's permission—have you heard anything about your cousin's father—his position, I mean—his social status—his manner of life?"

"No."

"Your father, I know, has told you nothing; no one else has done so?"

"I never speak to any one about my family."

"Your family! There you are, running away with an idea again. Your aunt's husband was *not* a member of your family. However, 'thereby hangs a tale.' I have not time to tell it now, but——"

"I do not wish to hear it," I said hotly. "If my father wished me to know it he would have told me."

But Miss Ashley only continued to smile in her superior way. "What a hot-headed child it is!" she said, tapping me lightly on the cheek. "Know, my little Dame Quixote, that your father wishes me to tell you the whole story. He agrees with me that you ought to know it, but he feels unequal to the effort of telling it to you himself."

For the first time in my life I felt angry with my dear father. After all that had passed between us there was surely no necessity to employ another to tell me what was in his heart. But also I felt that further resistance to Miss Ashley's will was in vain. She asked for my company at her after-dinner tea that evening. I accepted the invitation knowing that I was to hear the story. If I had known then, as I know now, what arguments she used to persuade my father, I would have acted very differently. But as James said—-he says the same still with far less reason—I was young; I did not know the world.

END OF CHAPTER THE THIRD.

HOW TO ENTERTAIN AT CHRISTMAS.



CHRISTMAS gatherings, if not entirely confined to the family, are as a rule mainly composed of relatives, possibly of all ages. I know one happy home where four generations have assembled for the last three Christmas Days.

Unfortunately, family parties do not inevitably mean concord, though they ought to do so. There are always some lonely people whom it is a charity to include in the invitations; and while conferring a kindness, a hostess may possibly by their presence be tending to preserve the general harmony.

The one ingredient to be universally infused is gladness. Everybody can, at all events, *endeavour* to bring goodwill and a smiling countenance to the festive board, banishing for a time the recollection of every-day worries. There is all the rest of the year

to think of them. This is peculiarly the children's time, and we would have them as happy as we were in the old Christmas Days of long ago.

The party may assemble only on Christmas Day, or the house may be full from Christmas Eve until over Twelfth Night; in both cases much depends upon the hostess.

I think it was Lord Beaconsfield who said that happiness was atmosphere. To bring about a general feeling of enjoyment, much depends on the surroundings. The house must be cheerful, the ruling power animated. It is worth while to bestow some little trouble on the decoration of the rooms. Have plenty of shining holly, and laurel too, and don't omit the mistletoe, for we have long ago forgotten all about the paganism, magic, and superstition which surrounded it, and have relegated it to scenes of social merri-

ment. Many a shipload I have seen despatched from St. Malo, the French people hardly understanding its subsequent purpose, and a very good trade is done with it in the West of England.

I like to see a motto of welcome wrought in holly hanging in the hall, and in the yearly volume of CASSELL'S FAMILY MAGAZINE for 1877 there is an article, "How to Decorate the House at Christmas-time," with many useful suggestions. Flowers brighten up a room wonderfully, and should you have enough and to spare, I would advocate the American plan of making bells and balls of flowers to hang beneath chandeliers and over doors. They look best entirely of one kind of bloom. The balls are easily made by tying the ends with string, the bells require a foundation of the bell shape. Last year we made this of crinoline wire covered with coarse muslin about twelve inches long, and hid it entirely with mistletoe; the waxen berries looked extremely pretty among the greenery as it hung over the doorway.

See that there is an abundance of Christmas literature about. Servants and children as well as the grown-up guests delight in looking at pictures. A pretty, well-written story of Christmas happiness is wont to diffuse a sense of enjoyment among its readers. The glowing freshly-written pictures of the Christmas shops and the holiday people in the Christmas numbers of our magazines inspire us with a renewed power of happiness as each season comes round.

Be sure that your hearth burns brightly. Though the yule log of Scandinavian origin is no longer drawn in by household retainers, bestridden by old Father Christmas, to be kept alight if possible to Candlemas, you will have no bad substitute in a fair-sized piece of ship's timber crackling in the grate.

It does not come within my province to enter upon the question of Christmas cheer. The board should be as liberally spread as means will allow. Children delight in a substantial tea, over which their elders can preside before their own Christmas dinner is served. An abundance of crackers and bon-bons add to the general fun—which, by-the-by, I have known enhanced by drawing lots for partners at the dinner-table.

Everybody likes presents, and presents are inseparably connected with the season. Queen Elizabeth so delighted in them that even her "kitchen wenches" presented her with lozenges; and fans, bracelets, and treasures of all kinds poured into the royal lap when December came.

There are two points to be considered: first, what to give, and then how best to make the giving a source of pleasure. The poor should not be forgotten. A good plan is the Christmas basket, carried pedlar fashion into the hall, and its contents distributed by all the members of the family to the poorer neighbours invited to be present, and to the servants. Such charity is doubly welcome accompanied by kindly words and wishes, and it greatly delights the young people to see their handiwork appreciated.

Christmas-trees, which the Prince Consort intro-

duced among us nearly forty years ago, have established their fame, and there is not much that is new to be told about them. They have this drawback, that in removing the presents there is a danger of fire; and it is not a bad arrangement to hang the tree itself with beads and glittering balls brilliantly lighted, and set the presents round the table well wrapped up, a small lighted doll's-candle by each; the children are thus able to examine their gifts by the light of their very own candle. A snow-ball about a yard in circumference, made in two halves, with calico covered with wadding, on a wire foundation, filled with presents, may be rolled into the room and allowed to burst open, when a general scramble ensues. A gipsy-tent rigged up in a back drawing-room, with a presiding gipsy up to her work, who distributes the gifts with an appropriate word or two to each recipient, or a post office or parcels delivery office, with some bustling officials, may be made to produce a great deal of fun. We had a very successful distribution once from a hen's nest, concocted out of a clothes-basket, the gifts wrapped up to represent eggs, and the whole surmounted by a stuffed hen; but it went off so well because we had a clever henwife, who, dressed in flowered skirts and a high pointed cap like Mother Hubbard, delighted everybody. Another year we had a Cheap Jack, who made many of us forget the pleasure our presents gave us by the roars of laughter he produced, standing in the centre of the drawing-room ottoman, and, with many a merry *bon-mot*, scattering the parcels here and there. The Mummers, the Lord of Misrule, St. Nicholas, or Knecht Rupert may be made to put in an appearance and give away the presents. Knecht Rupert, in Germany, makes the distribution according to the deserts of the children, dressed in a white robe, a mask, flaxen wig, and high buskins. The Lord of Misrule wears the high top-boots of Charles II.'s time, ruff at throat, and a flowing robe. He disappeared in 1640, but before that he presided over Christmas festivities in the houses of the king and nobles, and the Mayor of London, from Allhallow Eve to Candlemas Day. He has been resuscitated of late for the special purpose of present-giving on more than one occasion.

A Christmas ship has the advantage of being very pretty, and of exercising some ingenuity. A boy clever at carpentering could even make a good-sized one. The presents are concealed in the hold; two feet long is a good size, and the rigging crystallised with alum to look like snow is a great improvement.

These distributions may take place at night or during the day, but at this season there is plenty to amuse during the day-time—long walks, when the weather is favourable, or maybe skating, and a good game of battledore and shuttlecock—or the improvement upon it, Badminton—in-doors, if it rains; in which case, too, let me recommend bean-bags. For this make four bags six inches square, of strong holland, and half fill them with dry peas. The two players stand before each other, a bag in each hand, and

throw simultaneously with both hands. The bag hurled from the right hand must pass to the left hand of the *vis-à-vis*, while the bag in the left hand is passed to the right, and the left hand receives the opponent's bag from his right hand. The double movement is difficult, and requires knack, but is good exercise.

If the skating-ground be near the house, some hot drinks are most acceptable, especially to those standing on the banks. I give the recipe for one which is always approved, viz., egg wine :—Beat up two eggs, and add a little cold water; boil one pint of elder wine with spice, then beat all well together, pouring from one vessel to the other, replace it on the fire till it boils, and drink when quite hot.

When the Vicar of Wakefield's altered fortunes obliged him to repair with his family to a distant neighbourhood, we read how his new parishioners "kept up the Christmas Carol, sent true love knots on Valentine's Morning, ate pancakes on Shrovetide, showed their wit on the first of April, and religiously cracked nuts on Michaelmas Eve;" and these observances of old customs would seem to savour of a taste for simple pleasures. If carol-singing be one of them, it is certainly being revived amongst us, and this delightful form of musical amusement by young people is a Christmas pleasure worth cultivating. "God rest you, merry Gentlemen," and "Nowell, Nowell," date back to Henry VI.'s time; "Come let us all sweet Carols sing" is of German origin; and "We three Kings of Orient are," American; but there are many admirable collections.

If you bring your entertainments from without, there is a choice of conjuring, a Punch and Judy show, bell-ringing, fantocinni, and the magic lantern. In the

latter each year there are marked improvements, and you may follow the fortunes of Tam o' Shanter, Don Quixote, the Forty Thieves, and Johnny Gilpin, or visit the scenes of the Afghan or the Zulu War, or discover the wonders of the microscope, or enjoy the pranks of a Christmas pantomime as displayed from the lens on the white sheet.


Besides bagatelle, loto, spelicans, dominoes, and the rest, there are some newer games, such as Chinese Gong, viz., a wooden stand with a pasteboard gong having a hole in the centre, into which the players throw one of six balls, which fall into numbered receptacles: Patchesi, or Homeward-bound, a round game between draughts and fox and geese; gobang, fishponds. "How Stanley attained Congo," "Doggett's coat and badge boat-race," are amusing too, and each week something new is brought out.

Recitations are just now very fashionable, and it is quite worth while to prepare some beforehand. Do not let them be too pathetic. Shakesperian readings always please, I mean those in which each part is read by a different person, but read carefully, and studied beforehand. A diversity of such amusement each evening would make a fortnight or three weeks pass all too quickly, and render the remembrance of Christmas time memorably pleasant. Recitations from good and entertaining authors never come amiss.

I cannot do better than conclude with one of the best of Christmas good wishes, which we owe to one of them: "Many merry Christmases, many happy New Years, unbroken friendships, great accumulation of cheerful recollections, affection on earth, and heaven at last."

ARDERN HOLT.

GARDENING IN DECEMBER.

ERHAPS we are growing weary of the old year, but at all events we know for a certainty that the old year is growing weary of us, for very soon we shall be bidding adieu to it. Not unfrequently we weary of our very pleasures, and find ourselves craving after some new and unbeaten track of recreation. A new thing—a real "hit" in Christmas cards, or a new game that would even cut out lawn tennis, which in its turn has supplanted the once popular croquet—would probably make the fortune of the inventor. Even at this season of the year, when we are all so happy in the prospect of our annual fireside reunion, is it not possible that perhaps a certain portion of our happiness is derived from the mere fact that we are entering upon a *new* year? Well, and doubtless this is natural and justifiable enough. But it may be asked, what has all this prelude to do with gardening? Nothing, perhaps, saving only that we gardeners are of opinion that the familiar yet ever-new delights of our craft con-

trast most favourably with any pleasure that can be attained in this feverish and restless chase after a new toy.

"Here we are again" then—as the children's favourite jester will soon tell us—"here we are again," all rosy from our hearty and invigorating work, with the spud over our shoulder and the trowel in our hand; "here we are again," with the frost-spangled landscape for our scenery, nor are we in any degree weary of our performance, as time we hope will show.

December, then, being not unnaturally a month for retrospect, we may perhaps with advantage, before giving our few general hints for gardening operations at this time of the year, look back and say a word upon our failures and successes, and upon the possible causes of each. Up to the end of March in this year 1880, that will soon be a thing of the past, we gardeners were in great hope. January and February were "seasonable" to the very letter, and in the third month we augured most favourably from the good "peck of dust." But if we took fright at the return of the cold in April, we got almost into