CHRISTMAS ALONE: A PHANTASY.

"IT'S a pity to spend Christmas away from one's relations," a girl once said to me; and I think she was right. On Christmas Day more than on any day in the year, the members of a family like to gather round one hearth and be happy together. The father and mother wish to see their children before them on this day, and the children, whatever age they may be, and whether married or single, like to have about them their near relations when Christmas comes.

If we think of it, this feeling arises not only from the greatness of the festival, but also from the fact that we regard our Christmas Days as landmarks in the history of our lives. They are like birthdays without those melancholy reflections which will obtrude themselves on us when we suddenly find ourselves a year older. Christmas is essentially an anniversary of pleasure; the good and the healthy are more than usually happy on this day; it is indeed a dull heart that feels no thrill of joy when the cheerful festival approaches.

There is a saying, "Christmas alone is no Christmas at all," and in this sense one 25th of December was no Christmas for me. I had been for a walking tour alone, in the East of England, in that dull time of the year when all the beauty of autumn has passed away, and winter is just commencing, and showing its worst side: that season when the warm days are not sunny, and the cold days not bracing, a withering season which destroys and gives no return. Having spent my nights at old village inns, and the greater part of my time on country roads, I had lost count of the days of the week and month, and was surprised on arriving at Lynn, in Norfolk, to find that the day after the morrow would be Christmas Day. This tempted me to return, but the weather, which so far had spoilt my tour, now showed signs of improvement; winter was putting on a brighter garb, and a clear and frosty Christmas might be expected.

For the first time in my life I determined to spend Christmas alone, and in an old-world town. Was that Lynn? No, it was not; for though Lynn *is* an old-world town, it was not old-world enough for me. As I was not to spend Christmas with my people, I would have as lonely a one as possible; so I left Lynn, "put on spurt" as athletes say, and passed many an old church of great archæological interest situated in beautiful scenery, which, however, ceases to be beautiful when the villages are left, a characteristic of this part of the world being that all the beauty surrounds the villages.

The weather was cold. It snowed now and again, and there was a cutting wind, made more biting by the proximity to the sea; but I stepped out manfully, regardless alike of wind and snow. Even in this lonely part of the country evidences of the joyful festival were not wanting. Numerous traps and dog-carts passed me, freighted with holly and Christmas cheer, the little village cottages were lit up and decorated, and the old farm-labourers trudged home with happy faces, evidently thinking of the good dinner and happy day which awaited them on the morrow.

At about half-past three o'clock, I arrived, foot-sore and tired, at the place where my Christmas was to be spent. It was already getting dark, few people were about, and the scene was a very dreary one. A prosperous seaport had this village, or rather town, once been; evidences of past wealth were to be seen in the large houses and wide streets, and a grand old second-pointed church, venerable and ivy-grown, reared its stately tower high above all. What changes had this old church seen in the decayed town; for local brains, local hands and money, had shaped its splendid traceried windows, its stately arches and embattled tower. Unlike the houses, however, the church, though little if at all restored, is magnificent to-day, venerable but not decayed, firm as a rock, though five centuries old, a symbol of the eternity of religion, and its handmaid art.

The grandeur of the church, however it might feed the mind, does not feed the body, and a craving for the creature comforts of food, warmth, and rest, soon led me to inquire for the inn, if inn there was in so woebegone a place.

"There be'es no inn 'ere," said a man; "but at the 'Black Horse' they've got a bed or two."

So to the "Black Horse" I directed my steps.

It was not easy to find one's way; the gloomy streets were deserted, save for one small group of rowdy boys, who seemed most out of place in the decayed town. Surely, one would have thought, the silent streets, the great deserted mansions, would restrain their boisterous laughter; surely some thought of the great bygone would temper their rowdy gaiety. But after all, why should they? Why should youth and vigour be depressed by thoughts of a past, however much its greatness may have contrasted with present gloom?

The "Black Horse" was a poor house when approached from one side, but on the other it looked on to a spacious square, a huge dreary piazza built in by large houses, the majority deserted, the others tenanted by the more prosperous people of the town.

"Can you give me a dinner?" I asked the landlord.

"And what may you be pleased to call a dinner? There's cold pork and cheese; you're lucky to get that to-day," was the ungracious reply.

So off cold pork and cheese I made my dinner, the

humble repast being shared with another, a commercial man, who was, however, poor company. He commenced by asking me a few questions about farming and "prices," and discovering from the answers my utter ignorance of these matters, he evidently put me down as a fool with whom it was waste of time to converse, and was silent for the rest of the meal.

After dinner I strolled out into the old square, which looked more dreary now that it was lit up by the moon. Scarcely any of the houses showed signs of habitation; there was not a soul about, the larrikins had gone, and I was alone in the dying town. I wandered out of the square into one or two narrow dark streets, and by-and-by found myself at the harbour, from which there stretches a dam to prevent encroachments of the sea. The dam was of considerable length; indeed it seemed endless to me, and from it a good view of the harbour is obtained. I walked for about ten minutes over the dam, and then turned round and looked at the town.

The night was perfectly clear; the pale light of the moon was reflected in the still harbour, and the long coast-line of deserted mansions and old custom-houses was cast into shadow. One ship with its lofty mast was in the harbour, the solitary representative of a dying trade. A huge hulk had this ship, and the rigging, so black against the starlit sky, gave to it a ghost-like appearance. Grand in its solitude, it looked an ill-omened vessel, and, like the *Flying Dutchman*, its presence seemed to bode no good. Was it a ghost of former days come to remind the old seaport that its days were numbered, and its trade for ever gone?

There was not a light on the whole coast-line. Ah! yes, presently the tiny glimmer of a little rushlight was just visible in one of the smallest houses, and accentuated the gloom.

And this was in England, the greatest maritime country the world has ever seen. We talk of the dead cities of the Zuyder Zee and of a bygone Venice. I have stayed in the queenly city of the doges, but not half so gloomy, not a quarter so dead is it as this remnant of a bygone England. There are dying ports in this great commercial country. The maritime wealth of this centre of the world's trade gets more and more concentrated—a few colossal ports, not content with their bloated wealth, are swallowing up that little which staved off ruin from the time-honoured representatives of a bygone England's maritime greatness. But you old ports, you will have your revenge—your rivals also will decline in wealth, man himself and man's work follow an inexorable law—growth, maturity, decay—your rivals have seemingly approached their second stage, and long may they remain there, but they cannot always do so, and what then? Unlike yours, their old age will not be venerable and picturesque; unlike you, they will leave to a future generation a terrible legacy, a nightmare of greedy centralisation; if still thickly populated, the filth, squalor, and vice which now disgrace their humbler streets, will reign supreme; if deserted, which is more probable, they will be eyesores, hideous ruins, relics of a wealth that divorced itself from art and beauty, built in meanness—on the one side a stuccoed palace, on the other a row of hovels—gorged itself in luxury in its heyday, and left only its antitheses poverty and ruin.

Such thoughts came over me when looking at the old seaport, dismal thoughts—un-Christmas-like thoughts you call them, reader, and so they were, for Christmas is a festival of birth, not of death.

I turned back and again approached the harbour, and so greatly had the gloomy scene depressed me, that I felt quite nervous; the narrow streets seemed about to close in, the long shadows seemed to pursue me; I commenced to run; and longed to see a human being. Again the great square, but more than ever dreary now; a thin layer of snow covered the rank ill-kept grass, the moon had retired behind the lofty mansions, long black shadows threw themselves in fantastic forms across the square—it looked uncanny and unreal. I must have caught a chill. I was terribly nervous; the uneven layer of snow in the curious light looked like little heaps of bones; to my excited imagination the square seemed converted into a colossal charnel. I laughed at the folly, but could not shake off the fear.

A man approached from the other side of the square. Never was I so pleased to see a fellow-creature! I rushed up to him, and asked the way to the inn; there it was, opposite me. I knew it when I asked the question, but something had to be said, and I longed to hear a human voice. The thought of the night now made me tremble; I remembered the bed-room, a great old-fashioned room approached from a corridor, just such a place as ghosts frequent. Oh, no! not ghosts, I could not be afraid of them, don't believe in them in fact; it's only nervousness, stupidity, the effects of a chill—useless philosophy, ever at hand when you are not wanted, never convincing when nerves are unstrung.

The inn was shut up for the night. I knocked, rang, shouted, and at last the landlord, surly and bad-tempered, let me in. "We're quiet folk 'ere and don't stay up o' nights," and handing me a dirty candlestick containing the flickering end of a rushlight, he shouted after me, "When gents stay at a hotel they ought to get their drinks there." Uncivil speeches, but they somewhat restored me: the landlord at all events was no ghost. I groped my way up the stairs and reached the corridor, long and uneven, and so draughty that at every step I thought the candle would go out. I shaded it with my hand, and made a search for my room. How foolish of me! Of course it was on the higher landing, so, turning back again, and carefully protecting the wretched light, I mounted the second flight of stairs, and arrived at the other corridor. A sudden gust of wind here extinguished the candle, the silvery light of the moon streamed into the passage, a mysterious and vivid ray was thrown straight into my face from the window at the head of the stairs. I rubbed my eyes and peered into the darkness, but could for the moment see nothing. How was I to find my room? Let me think. Ah! it was at the further end of the corridor, at right angles with

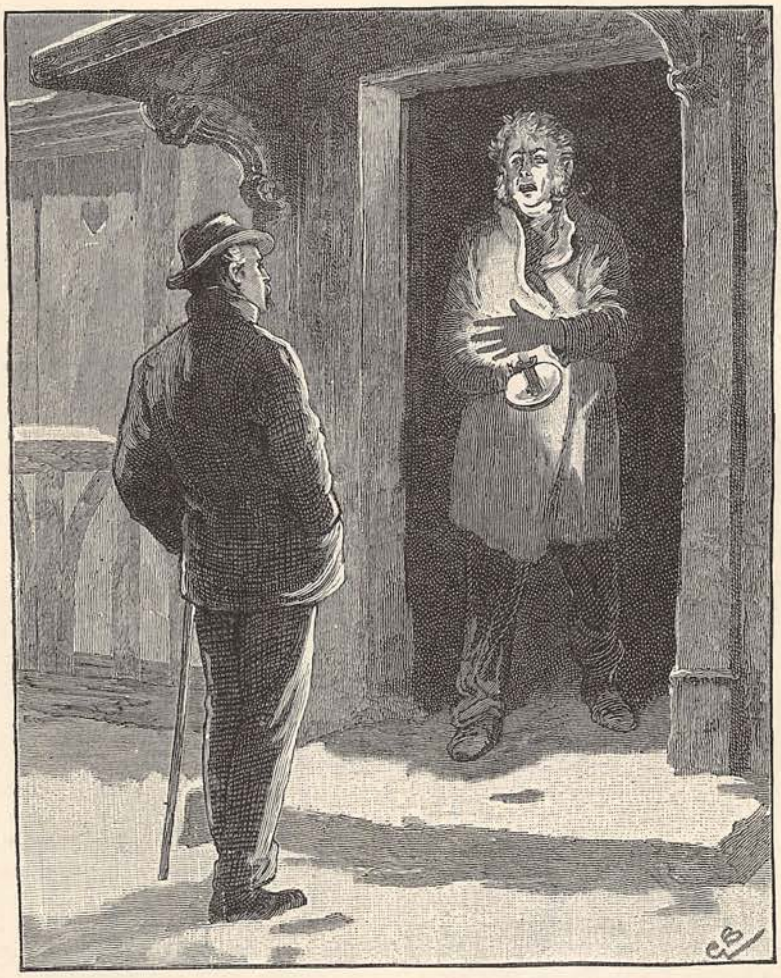
a great whitewashed wall. I rubbed my eyes again, turned my head and looked straight down the long passage. I stood for a moment paralysed with fear. There on that whitewashed wall, some twenty yards distant, was a huge shadow, the right hand extended in the act of warning, and pointing to a room—my room!

I almost fainted with fear, and let the candlestick drop, when the spell was instantly broken and the shadow explained. It was, of course, myself. I had held the candlestick out at arm's length to protect my face in the dark, which gave to the shadow the position of the arm.

I lit the candle again, and went into my room more than ever nervous now. No use trying to deceive myself, it was ghosts I feared. That solitary ship in the harbour, of a form so out of date, so unlike our modern builds, *was* a phantom; the old port had received its warning on this very night; the ancient mariners had come to reclaim what an ungrateful posterity had rejected. I locked the door, undressed quickly, and got into bed, but did not extinguish the light, for the fear which I had vainly tried to stifle now fairly mastered me.

Contrary to the ordinary opinion, we reason in our fear, and the fear—which in my case was of a distorted and fantastic origin—led to my reasoning in a fantastic, not to say ridiculous manner. Those ghostly mariners would surely come to the inn, and must approach my room, I being the only occupant of the place except the landlord and his family. If they did come, shadows of a past, occupants of a region probably possessing faculties far exceeding our own, they would be able to read my thoughts. I determined to pacify them—think well of the old town and a bygone England, wish evil to those monster ports that had ruined this once prosperous place.

Having arrived at this singular determination, and



"AT LAST THE LANDLORD, SURLY AND BAD-TEMPERED, LET ME IN" (*p.* 115).

received some comfort from it, my attention was directed to the candle, which was making furious attempts to prolong its miserable existence. It flickered, died down, then flared up to a brilliancy it had never formerly known, and finally expired, like all worthless objects, tenacious of its worthless life.

I slept soundly, how long it is of course impossible to say ; but I awoke suddenly and sat up in bed, surprised to find how light it was. The blind was drawn up, I had forgotten over-night to pull it down, and the moonlight streamed through the window, calm and beautiful. It was Christmas night, the most comforting and the greatest of all festivals had come round again. Revived with the thought, I got out of bed and looked through the window. It must have snowed heavily ; the square was now quite white, the old mansions were completely covered with a spotless mantle, all traces of decay, all unkind markings of the hand of Time were obliterated, stately proportions only were visible—a day's rejuvenescence in honour of the one birth that escaped the penalty of death.

How still and hushed all nature seemed ! I would open the window and look out. I was about to do so, when a curious sensation came over me, as if I had been touched. I was conscious of having felt or heard something. I looked behind me, there was nothing ; then the impression defined itself into sound, ever so faint—a surging sound—a living thing was disturbing the death-like stillness of the night. It was outside, a sound of movement, then a clicking noise, louder and louder, followed by the dropping of a chain !

I stood perfectly still for a moment, and all my fears returned in tenfold force ; then I swiftly and silently rushed to the bed, threw the clothes over my head, and stopped up my ears. I sat up in bed again, tried to buoy myself up, when a sinister thought whispered to me, "You are no good ; you are too frightened ; leave others to deal with the danger, whatever it is." The temptation mastered me, and I was sinking into bed again, when the heavy, gruff voice of the landlord was heard shouting to his son ; I thought he grasped a weapon ; then the response of the other man, and finally an opening and shutting of doors.

I dressed quickly, and now felt ready for anything ; and can assure you, my reader, that though you may have curled your lips in scorn at my cowardice, now all vestige of fear had left me. A violent situation had dispelled all ghostly superstitious fears ; I was completely roused from my lethargy.

Seizing my stick, I rushed out of the room and downstairs, but taking the wrong direction, arrived in the coffee-room ; meanwhile a scuffle was going on outside, a sound of blows and angry voices. I was impatient, and in my excitement could not open the door of the room, which had slammed behind me. I could hear the gruff voice of the landlord, and then an agonising cry. I tugged at the door, it would not unfasten ; my excitement grew intense. Unable longer to restrain myself, I rushed to the window and struck at it with all my might, shivered it to atoms, jumped through the aperture, and ran into the square, in the middle of which were two dark forms bending over another.

All was over, that was evident. The landlord was leaning on a long, heavy stick, evidently the weapon which had settled the encounter ; he was flushed, and for a moment speechless from excitement, and was looking down upon his late antagonist.

I approached the group, and saw the prostrate man. It must have been a desperate fight. A huge figure was stretched at full length in the snow—a sailor with a long white beard and brawny arms, like an elderly Hercules, his hand grasping a short thick stick, his big frame still quivering from the blow he had received. I looked down on the man, and kneeling in the snow, saw that he had fainted. I lifted him up slightly, and the moon, which had been obscured by a passing cloud, suddenly threw its light straight upon his face. I started at the face, so unlike what I had expected to see ; exposure and want were stamped with terrible emphasis on the manly features. Here was no dastardly ruffian, no housebreaking rascal, but a starving man, led by absolute necessity to a desperate deed. The head was noble, like the pictures of St. Peter, and the long grey unkempt hair, the begrimed face and arms, the tattered clothes and shoeless feet, told their tale of privation and misery. The strong frame was reduced to a skeleton, but those brown sinewy hands, so honest-looking, they would have worked, and with good effect, had they been given the chance. Even the landlord was touched.

"No wonder he chucked up so quickly. I thought I had a tough 'un to deal with, such a big-carcased chap."

A few people, disturbed by the noise, approached the square, and I sent one of them for the chemist, while the landlord, his son, and I lifted up the old sailor and took him to the inn. Just a little life still left in the old place ; some twenty or thirty people crowded round the inn, anxious to hear the cause of the disturbance. We shut the door and bade the people go away, they would hear all in the morning. This was foolish, and the crowd at once increased, and literally besieged the place, while the chemist arriving at this juncture, there was a rush to the bed-room where we had conveyed the poor burglar. The chemist was a kindly fellow, not much use it is true, but luckily for him his patient returned to consciousness on his arrival, a fact which, for some inscrutable reason, greatly redounded to his credit with the townsfolk.

The old man soon told his miserable tale ; how he had tried hard to get work, had tramped for miles, and at last arrived at this port, dead beat, and feeling that he could not live another hour without food. How he had then tried to force his way into the inn, which he discovered to be only fastened by a rusty chain.

We felt compassion for the poor fellow, and the landlord gave up his idea of "getting the law out o' him," a wise resolve, there being nothing left for the law to take. I saw that the once powerful frame was about to succumb, not to the landlord's blow ;

no, there had been a longer fight, but starvation and exposure had at last conquered, and were about to complete their gnome-like work.

The people looked kindly on the dying man; perhaps they felt a sympathy, a fellow-feeling with him. Was he not a sailor, a waif from some far-off port probably like their own? But how much more miserable, how hopelessly ruined, must be that port which sends a man to rob from *them!* They asked him where he hailed from, and I could see with what interest they awaited the answer. It was slow in coming; the sailor was almost past speech; but, rousing himself for the last time, he blurted out with an execration the hated name . . . No, surely not!—*that* storehouse of gold, *that* mighty city, that all-devouring port which had stretched forth its greedy hand to clutch the wealth of a whole coast: ruiner of this place and many such another! It could not be!

You people of an old-world town, your ideas are narrow, and your ways are out of date: you may yet have to seek a new and prosperous city. What was wealth to you and your ancestors, is to us a widow's mite; *now* gold is ladled out to some, but others are allowed to starve.

You remnant of a dying England, your working life is over, and your trade for ever gone. You are shrunken and decayed, and must allow others to do that which you once so well performed. You leave a legacy in your beautiful church, which outlives you because it symbolises an undying life; your spacious streets are grass-grown, and your mansions crumbling, but while they last they witness to your well-spent wealth, the honest keeping of your trust.

J. F. BREWER.

A GIRL'S FACE.

A GIRL'S face, where the budding rose
Of youthful beauty blooms and grows
By nature's influence, sweet and good,
To fuller grace of womanhood;
Is there a sight on earth so fair?
Consider well the raven hair
That clouds the forehead pure and white;
The lovely eyes, like stars of light,
In whose clear, hazel glance is seen
The soul untroubled and serene;
The ripe, bewitching lips, that part
With smiles like sunshine of the heart;
And all the charms, unnoted here,
That blossom sweet from year to year.

Time changes all. The fairest day
Of short-lived summer fades away,
And on the wintry garden-bed
The petals of the rose are shed;
Time steals the splendour from the hair,
And marks the brow with lines of care;
But there are beauties of the soul
That time and change may not control;
The faith and love, that still are blind
To others' faults, and good and kind,
And swift to help with blessed deeds
A sister's or a brother's needs,
These grow with years in brighter grace,
And add new beauty to the face.

J. R. EASTWOOD.

WHAT TO WEAR IN THE NEW YEAR.

CHIT-CHAT ON DRESS. FROM OUR PARIS AND LONDON CORRESPONDENTS.

I.—FROM OUR PARIS CORRESPONDENT.

"HOPE tells a flattering tale," but we must be sanguine indeed if, with our knowledge of climate deduced from experience, we expect anything but cold dark weather during the first month of the year, with, maybe, a clear sunny day occasionally in the country, and a very few such enjoyable innovations in London.

It is a most important point that outdoors, as well as indoors, children should be kept warm. The little cloak in our initial illustration fulfils this requirement admirably, for just upon the chest, where most warmth is needed, the material is arranged in kilt-pleats, so that it is in fact of a triple thickness mostly. It can be made in any soft thick cloth; beaver is the best, because it has a fleecy interwoven lining, but some of the new brocaded cloths are suitable. The garment is not, as would appear at first sight, a kilted front, with a curiously-cut cape over; but a pelisse with cape in one. At the back the pleats are broader, and a band of the same brocaded galon which borders the cape, and the light band that encircles the neck, are carried down the left side of the skirt. The pelisse has close-fitting under-sleeves to match, and it fastens at the side, and with it is worn a belt with metal clasps at the waist. Many children wear double-breasted coats of the Ulster form, with wide Incroyable revers at the side, made in plain or check cloths. The newest of these materials are woven with a fleecy frieze-like outside of uniform colour, and a checked lining of a