MADEIRA IN MARCH.

"DEAR FRIEND,—Are you thinking of taking a holiday this Spring? If so, have you thought of Madeira?"

Such was the tenor of a note from a friend, sent to me by that mysterious messenger, Her Majesty's Postal Service. It was certainly an astonishing question, as I had not thought of taking a change, and was feeling in excellent health, and had not fallen a victim to influenza for at least a year. I put the letter down hastily to take up others, and had nearly forgotten it, when, in an over-crowded condition of mind something for the moment irrecoverable seemed to be pressing for notice.

Ah! Madeira. That was it. Let me see the letter again:

"If you only could come as far as Madeira with me I would do as the doctor directs, and take a passage for the Cape but spending a fortnight with you on the way. Don't let my necessities influence you too much, but I dread the start of such a journey as the one I am ordered to take, and a few weeks in your cheerfulness—"

But I must not print any more, modesty forbids.

So I took up a big atlas, and that settled me. Reader, never take up an atlas if you think you ought to stay at home.

So my friend, cheered by an ambiguous letter, called on me, and everything was settled.

We took berths in the Scott, and visited the Portuguese and Spanish Consuls in London to have our passports validated, and then with a few purchases to complete our outfits we found ourselves in an ecstasy of expectation.

Friends and relatives saw us off from Waterloo, and one of them came on to Southampton to see one of the grandest steamships in the service, and to enjoy a luncheon on board.

It was a lovely morning, and as the tender steamed up to the big vessel the sun shone brilliantly upon us. A fair orchestra piped to us as we lunched in the gorgeous saloon, final adieux were emotionally effected, and we lifted anchor and sped onward.

And in order to divert my friend's mind from the sadness of leaving his beloved ones (I am a lonely man, and don't count in the realms of domestic felicities) I took him down to our cabin to arrange matters for the journey and to see that our small articles of luggage were safe. On opening the door, to our surprise a strange man confronted us, and with a glance apparently of recognition flew towards me, and shook my hand warmly, hoping that I was quite well.

"You see," he said, "this is my—hie—berth," pointing to the one I had appropriated, for there were four berths in the cabin, "but I hope we shall—hie—get on—hie—well together."

"Certainly, I hope so," I earnestly responded, and my friend and I withdrew our steps, clutched up the gangway, and as we reached the deck glanced with easily recognisable horror into each other's faces.

"What shall we do?" I gasped.

"Sleep on deck, if we can. I could not remain in the same cabin with such a man."

"Indeed you could not," I replied; for the stranger was undoubtedly a heavy toper, if not in actual delirium tremens. It was a sad and awful
spectacle, for he was young, and, indeed, would have been handsome, if it were not for the unhealthy colour on his cheeks and the wild look in his eye; a gentleman, too, and athletic in build and muscles.

I went to the chief steward to remonstrate, but fortunately found, without my asking, that they had already understood the position and had conveyed the unwelcome visitor to a single-berthed cabin.

My friend, who had, perhaps, been expecting some awful intelligence of disaster, such as the missing of all of our articles de voyage out of the porthole, was visibly relieved when he heard the good news.

"Perhaps, I shall sleep to-night after all," he said; "and I have not slept for many, many nights."

"I trust so," I replied; and after a further hour on deck, we descended to the sweet, merciful darkness. How I longed that his overworked and heated brain might rest! That indeed was the consummation for which this formidable voyage of his was undertaken.

"O welcome veil of peaceful night, that wraps the tired brain in peace, and soothes the rest!
The world is full of toilers, in whose nest such slackened tension but too rarely maps a perfect working day. O may such peace That drain the life, by subtle sleep's contest All conquered be, when sun sinks in the west, Until to earth the well-worn Earth relapse.

From every twinkling star may angels' eyes The easy sleep of worn manhood see; And after sweet of brow in heat of day Let night's sweet purple veil dispel his sighs, And give a rest like babe's on mother's knee, Or like to sleep of youngsters after play!"

I very soon fell asleep and I think my friend dozed for perhaps an hour—certainly not more—for whenever I woke he was turning his pillows, or sitting upright in the darkness, or walking silently about the cabin. The rattling of the furniture, glasses, etc., as we sped swiftly through the water, was, he thought, the disturbing element; but nothing could stop the noise, so he had to submit to it with a throbbing head and a nervous frame woefully overwrought.
At six he rose, dressed, and went on deck, while I remained in my berth, having made up my mind that I should find that the best place. I declined the steward's offer of breakfast, but when twelve o'clock came I altered my mind, and joined my friend above. The morning was a gorgeous one, and deck certainly the pleasantest. Above the boat seemed as steady as a rock, and to recline in our arm-chairs in the sun was delightful. A couple of rest seemed to suffice us as we quietly gazed over the vast expanse of sea. Seagulls flew about the masts, and large fish reared themselves out of the water, as if they also wished to enjoy the rays of the sun.

A short service had been held in the saloon, which my friend had attended and which I was sorry to miss. We talked leisurely on many topics, and whenever I thought my companion was becoming too excited, which was frequently the case, I, like a clever, dally-qualified nurse, turned the conversation into another channel.

And so the day passed sweetly on, and we went to our cabs about ten o'clock, thankful to have had so happy and healthful a day upon the waves.

The quiet of the time had induced sleep to come to the aid of my friend, and for the first night for many a week he slept peacefully. It was truly a refreshing sound to hear his light breathing in the darkness; and I thought of his complete restoration to health, his return to sound and hearty to the bosom of his loved ones, and of his return to mental work.

The following day was noteworthy for two experiences, both bad and one, and related to two of the passengers. The first of these was our friend the would-be fellow occupant of our cabin, who devoted his whole attention to me and would not suffer me out of his sight. He talked to no one else, and I, alas, had to hear his complaints of innocent suffering from ill-health and of the bad provision on board provided for such a delicate organisation. He blamed the captain, the shareholders of the line of steamers, the stewards, and the passengers, and accused an innocent lady of drunkenness for drinking a glass of soda-water.

When I thought I had succeeded in shaking him off during a walk, he would spy me out from the other end of the boat, and try as I most artfully to dodge him he would confront me at an unexpected turn, and tell me more of his history, which did not interest me in the least.

The other experience was that of a poor maid girl. She appeared to the sailors working, thinking they interfered with her movements. She requested books, pencils, and even rugs from her fellow passengers, and monopolised them. She was decidedly pretty, but her face was dirty and her hair unbound. Some on board actually took enjoyment from her peculiarities, and evidently wounded her by their relish of her eccentricities. We heard that she was a girl graduate, and that her condition was caused by mental overwork. Perhaps it was ludicrous for her to ask a hair-brained gambler on board (and there were several such) his opinion of Thuc, and to ask his admiration of a hit-motive of Wagner's, which she hummed aloud. But from our point of view the ignorance of the masses and their unmannerly and brutal bearing was the truer cause for derision.

On the afternoon of our third day land was sighted, and the news spread like a flame among the passengers. Many were the speculations as to what it was we saw, until we were assured that we were sighting the Desertas, and that this voyage would therefore prove to be the fastest on record. The sun was setting over Porto Santo, and tipped with crimson its volcanic peaks. As we passed them, on our right we caught a glimpse of distant Madeira—a vast black object—and thought how mysterious it must appear to the Portuguese navigators who were the first to discover the island.

It was astonishing with this first sight of land how everything on board altered. What was before a peaceable quiet ship was turned into a pandemonium, and what before was a roomy deck became filled with every conceivable kind of luggage. The stewards, too, were roused to unwonted action, and everyone seemed to be on the tip-toe of expectation.

At about half-past eight we were facing Funchal, the chief town of Madeira, and half-an-hour later we cast anchor. And then what a scene! the lights were doubled in number, and below us the sea was troubled as by a noisy town. Boats laden with coal, with fruit, with chairs and cane sofas, with little ballet-plumed birds and parrots. Diving boys cried for peace or silver to be thrown to them to catch between the toes of their feet, and we could see twinkling silver sixpences go down, down, down in the water under the light of the ship, and boys disappear (troubling the water in darkness as they dived) to return into their boats with the coins secure between their brown little toes. Oh, it was a strange sight! As we bent over and looked down the side of the vast vessel, things crawled up, and we found them to be men and women with jewellery for sale or other unexpected articles. And at last Mr. Reid, the proprietor of the chief hotels, came to us and recognising us from letters of introduction sent to him beforehand, conducted us and our luggage by small boats to the shore, when he disappeared.

But the Portuguese native knew his work and we were placed in bullock-waggons and driven to the customs. It was a strange experience driving in dark foreign streets in such a curious chariot; every turn seemed to take us into darker and more and more unusual-looking streets, until we descended and found that we had not escaped anything from dear old England. Then we returned to the chariot and drove gently over the cobbled streets to Hotel Camao.

Arriving there we felt at home at once! An English lady, bonny and with a bright smile, welcomed us in genial fashion and showed us to our rooms, where after ablutions we adjourned to the dining-room, refreshed ourselves and retired for the night thoroughly worn-out.

I remember nothing until at seven o'clock on the following morning one of the waiters brought me a cup of tea and a thin slice of bread and butter. He drew the blind and opened the window, and then—oh then—the sight and the perfume, and the sound! Behold a garden full of semi-tropical trees and plants, the banana, the fougipigine, and many others that I forget, although I did not get them up¹ at the time; roses in profusion, white and red cornellias, lilies of every kind under the trees, and the beds of many-coloured flowers edged with giant box, so green and so thick that a cat might have rested on any part of it. And then the scent from a huge tree crowded with large white trumpet-shaped flowers, and the brilliant sun to halo it all! I fancy I can see it now, so startling in its beauty with purple mountains ranged in tiers behind. And then the birds! Why, it seemed as though they had gone mad over the joy of it all, and my feelings were decidedly in sympathy with their emotions.

I dressed quickly and met my friend in the garden by a running fountain, but the sun being very hot we went together to the shade of a mighty oak, and thereaconed our delight and our good fortune.

The happy-looking, good-natured Madame Madeira, as we called the hostess of the hotel, came forward to pluck us a button-hole and to ask us how we slept, and both of us were
MADEIRA IN MARCH.

It was a delight to see the sea, to hear the waves, and to be able to satisfy her as to the amount of rest we had taken.

"Then come into breakfast, gentlemen," she said, and we were ushered into a room, the tables of which were crowded with roses and rare fruits. Among the latter were Cape gooseberries, bananas, loquats, prickly-pear, custard-apple, and passion-flower fruit, and heaped-up dishes of recently-gathered strawberries! But there is always a thorn with the rose, and she kindly warned us of dangers attending the eating of much fruit, at any rate for the first week, as there is a kind of illness, peculiar to Madeira, attending such immodestness as I for one was longing to continue.

"And now," said Madame Madeira, as we emerged from the breakfast-room, "begins the true business of your holiday in the island. You must go this morning up to Mount Church by bullock-car and return in a sledge in time for luncheon."

"Indeed," said my invalid friend, "I think you must excuse me. I do not feel quite—"

"Indeed I shall do nothing of the kind," said persistent Madame Madeira, "your carriage is at the door! So with that I locked an arm in my friend's and promised to stick to him to the death.

"But wait," called out madame, "how are you shod? No leather boots, please, as in England. Have you no India-rubber shoes? You are not about to walk down Pal Moll or Piccudilly; all our streets are paved with rounded pebbles of basalt brought from the coast, and you would return from ever so slight a walk in considerable agony."

Accordingly we went to our rooms and changed the boots we were so proud of—now and nicely got up—for deck-shoes, and then we started in earnest.

Our Portuguese driven was coolly dressed in white with a straw hat, and we walked, stepped into the little low waggon. The bullock went steadily over the stone streets and along a ravine by the side of a mountain-torrent. We passed quintas (houses) smothered in roses and climbing plants of every colour, and felt that we were in a veritable Garden of Eden.

Palm trees and cacti flowers were seen in every cottage garden, and as we mounted higher up the hill the Easter Lily was growing wild and in profusion upon the roadside, while a short distance from the top of the hill to the Church of Our Lady of the Mountain.

This church, with its twin towers, is a conceptions of the Virgin before setting out on their voyages, yet there was nothing sufficiently meritorious in art-work to reward us for our trouble in obtaining the keys of the building and then to pay the verger.

But from the terrace there was a gorgeous view right over Funchal, and we could gather a good general idea of the plan of the island. Behind us the mountains rose in purple mist to the height of 3000 or 4000 feet, and spread out in front of us were terraces upon terrace of sloping vineyards with the sage-expanse of pine-trees, white quintas (houses), and brilliant flowers made up a scene, the beauty of which can scarcely be surpassed anywhere else in the world. We shall mention, that "If Homer's beautiful description of the Phaeacian Isle, where fruit succeeded fruit, and flower followed flower, with its endless variety, be applicable to any modern one, it is to Madeira."

And as flow follows flower, and fruit, fruit, in this enchanted land, so with lightness of heart, and a blessed feeling of renewed vigour, and a keen perception of a newly-acquired happiness, ejaculation succeeded ejaculation in appropriately flowery sentences.

"What bliss!" exclaimed my companion.

"Why should I trouble to go to the Cape, when this is to be had without further journeying?"

"Indeed," I said, "I was thinking the same thing. It would assuredly be flying in the face of a beneficent Providence to turn one's back on such a lovely land as this before we need. And now, methinks, I will wait here till my last day, and return home direct instead of toiling through Spain as I had intended; you, having your berth booked beforehand, must go on to your journey's end."

Here our guide seemed anxious for our return, so we followed him, as we thought, to our bullock-sledge; but no bullocks were to be found, and we were asked to be seated on chairs which were mounted on sledges. We were on the top of a steep incline, and directly we were seated, the men pushed the machine, and we were precipitated at tremendous speed down the tiers of hills. We had to hold hard to the chair, and hang back as we passed, with lightening speed, anything that happened to be in the road. I suppose children never get in the road here, or they would certainly meet an early death.

On we went faster and faster, the cool air tempering our heated senses, and the men guiding us round turnings by means of a rein passed round the back of the sledge. In a few minutes we were down at the hotel by means of this sledge, whereas it had taken us about an hour and a half to ascend by means of the bullock car. The cavass is a native invention, and the bullock-car is an emanation from an English brain. Without the latter it would be difficult to get about the island because of the cobbled streets.

In the afternoon we hobbled over the cobblestones through the town of Funchal, and there saw the native in his element. All the funny little shops owned caged birds of bright plumage brought from Africa, and fine talking parrots. We crossed two of the mountain-streams to the Praça da Constituição, a pleasant square where a band was playing. This square lies between the cathedral, a dreamy-looking building, and the governor's palace, a rambling castellated place, with an ancient image of St. Lawrence over the chief gate. The Praça was gay with people chatting between eihar-pulls, and ever and anon a priest fitted by with buckled shoes and scarlet stockings showing beneath his glowing cloak.

Here is a low sledge crowded with heavy things and driven by a yokel of oxen. The whip of the noisy driver is flicked loudly, and cries of "ca para vigo he—-rt-ca-c-oval!" (Here to me, oxen!—here, here, here!) rend the air and disturb our hearing of the band's melody.

Among the articles to be bought in the shops are cane-chairs (very cheap and excellent in workmanship), inlaid wooden articles, plaia-thread mats, feather-flowers, knitted silk shawls, and embroidered eggs. The latter are most curious, and I cannot discover the method of workmanship, but they tell me that many eggs are broken before one is fully embroidered. I give an illustration of one that I brought home with me.

From the square we proceeded to the depot of the Bible and Religious Tract Societies, and found an interesting and useful assortment of books, which are welcomed by the Madeirens. We learnt from Mrs. Smart at the depot that, in order to carry on all her philanthropic schemes, she sends many senni-veins of Madeira to England for bazaars, and I should think many lady keepers find ready purchasers for guava-jelly, Cape gooseberry-jam, and red pepper, as well as for articles of a more permanent nature.

After an excellent dinner, consisting, among other dainties, of new peas, and French beans,
and pine-apples cut from the proprietor's celebrated pine-house, I again strolled out; but everything was so weirdly dark and unattractive that I quickly returned to the smoking-room, which is also the reading-room of the hotel.

While my friend was writing a letter on the following morning after breakfast, I called at the bureau, in order to interview Madame Madeira, who told me that she had decided that my friend and I should take a morning ride on horseback. I replied that I should be much pleased, but that I was afraid the exercise would be too severe for my friend. But she automatically pooh-poohed the idea, and changed the subject to describe the use of the hotel before conventual houses had been suppressed by the Portuguese Government. The building we were in was originally a Carmelite convent; and taking off the cover of her high desk she showed me the altar of what was originally the chapel. There, in fact, was the consecrated altar-stone, engraved with crosses let into the woodwork; and the shelves above were used by her for storing ink and other secular articles instead of for figures of saints, which originally had been their use. Indeed, it may have been the same figure at the time in one of the niches; but it was so much the reverse of a sacred one—an ugly trade advertisement—that I begged, for reverence or decency's sake, that she would remove it, and accordingly it was consigned to her own private sitting-room.

When she returned, a large elderly man came with a wary face to cry off attending meals in the dining-room, when Madame Madeira exclaimed:

"Oh, I know what you want," and pouring out a little glass of medicine, she said, "Drink that off at once, sir."

"Certainly I will, madam," he politely replied; "but may I ask what it is you are giving me?"

"Drink it off at once, I tell you," said she, ignoring his question. And like a lamb he drank it, for there was no gainsaying Madame Madeira; and I was glad at luncheon-time that the traveller was in his place with the other guests.

But Madame had another task before her—to arrange for my friend's trip.

"Mr. —-," she said, "you will go with this gentleman for a ride this morning. I have ordered your horse."

"I am sorry to say that I——.

"Your horse, sir, is at the door with a man to conduct you. To-morrow you will thankfully ask me for another trip on horseback, so off you go. Lunch at one o'clock."

We were soon, almost before we were aware of it, mounted high in air, overlooking everybody's private vineyards and gardens, and as the sight was decidedly refreshing, we referred to Madame as a witch, or, rather, as a goddess.

"I say, Sancho Panza, I cried the invalid, "we will do this again; it is exceedingly enjoyable."

"Certainly, Don Quixote," I responded. "And so we will."

But we never repeated the experiment, although we wished to do so, and are therefore all the more grateful that Madame Madeira was such a controlling force.

We made the acquaintance of some delightful people at the hotel, and some who were interesting, perhaps, though not so acceptable. There was a wicked, big, blatant wine-bibber next to me at dinner, who talked enigmatically; and close beside him was a most learned Englishman—probably one of the most learned—who was a great connoisseur of wine and cookery: Messieurs Mind and Matter, we called them. Both had pimpled faces, and both were driven nearly mad by the flies that seemed to attack them and no one else. I used to wonder which the flies preferred—the muscular or the vegetal, and I thought, though these were so opposite, that perhaps there was little to choose, as both seemed to be so diseased; and a cry went up from my heart to thank my Maker that He had given me neither poverty nor riches in the marvellous world of mind.

Among the delightful people were a brother and son, both truly generous and refined, and with them we went together in hammocks to the Grand Cural, and had a glimpse into the heart of the island—the very spirit of its attractiveness. The highest peaks rise from the centre of the island, and from these peaks to the coast are huge fissured slopes; and these fissures, or rather the Americans would call them, calafons, are called curval or fold, used in the sense of safe-places for sheep.

The hammock (rêde) is a canvas bed, suspended from a pole, curtained round, and fitted with a mattress and pillows. It seemed a lazy method of progression, but it was too enjoyable to quarrel with, though I must do the bearers credit and say that they could in no sense be called lazy. How they did march up the mountains, each man with an end of the pole on a shoulder, using a sort of alpenstock to walk with! These sticks they worked with a circular movement as they touched the ground, in order that they should fit in between the stone cobbles and not slide off the top of a slippery pebble.

We were a merry party, singing and shouting to one another in our glee as we ascended the ribbon roads, and wound round one mountain after another. We saw the method, which is unique, of irrigating the island by means of wooden troughs, carried down from the heights to the cultivated land below. These channels are called Levadas, and their use is found very necessary during summer droughts.

As we neared the top of the Cural the sun went in; and, in a shivering condition, we partook of luncheon, and
in the night had lashed the sea into paroxysms of rage, and their little boat, in which they were rowed to the ship, was turned over and again lost in the heavy waves. One poor lady, in leaving the ship for the land had her ribs broken, and it was said that several fishermen but durst not speak at their dreadful calling were drowned.

But enough of this gloomy scene. Let, as a contrast to the usual brightness of this wonderful island.

And when we parted to go on our respective ways, my friend and I shook hands and solemnly vowed, if the fates were propitious, to revisit together the isle of the blest, the land of fruit and flowers, of milk and of honey.

C. F.

THREE CHRISTMASIDES.

By E. HARPER-ASHVIN, Author of "Agnes Childehede," etc.

CHAPTER II.

Christmas has come and gone many times, and again we visit Miss Ashford. It is the Holy Eve, and she sits alone as of yore in the same firelit room deep in thought. She looks old now; her face more wrinkled, and the once bonny brown hair thickly streaked with grey, and partly covered with a dainty cap. It was just now, as the usual busy hands lidly in her lap, as gazing into the glowing depths of the fire before her, her thoughts wander back eight years, to the time of her greatest sorrow, the loss of her mother and aunt. It is a sorrow still, and will ever be so, but, even as in travelling away from our English hills, their sharp outline is softened and beautified by the blue haze which reigns upon them, deepening as the distance increases, so the trial once so overwhelming has been veiled by the mists of past time, a thankaria and hallowed by the courts andEquip by the memory, and hallowed by the memory.

We cannot see the beauty of those rocky peaks when close upon them, but the hills glow then, and needly bowered her head; but she sees, partly at least, the purpose now, for in that first loneliness she found how near the Master could come, and hope, with His nearness, His companionship, she could never really have a solitary life. Of late years too, she has had the blessing of human love, for her nieces have been to her her daughters, and never once has she regretted or felt the charge heavy. There is a probability of the said charge being lightened just now, and she smiles as she thinks of the dawning love-light which has begun to shine in her Lily's dark eyes.

"I think it is worthy of her, but I hope he won't speak yet, she is so young," she murmured softly to herself. "We should miss her so, shouldn't we, doggies?" She was strokes of the same little spindle with which we found her long ago, very old and very fat now, and never far away from his mistress.

At this moment the outer door opened, and a rush of cold air and merry voices announced the arrival of the two girls, who had been helping to dress the church in its Christmas robe of green.

"He's come, aunt," shouted a voice presently from the kitchen (for they had come through the backway), "taking off our damp boots. We won't be a minute—Mary is getting tea.

And in less time than most young ladies take to make their toilet, they were all seated at the table, and Edie, now a tall fair child of eleven, was giving a laughing gluttony of their spread and warm home through the snow.

"Mr. Merton wanted to come all the way with us," she concluded, "but I told him that with our present sallies to arrant, but been through to decorate, we should be too busy to talk to him to-night, and that we could manage very well.

"You are too saucy, Edie," remarked her aunt, trying to speak gravely, and noticing the deep flush that overspread her elder niece's face, also that she left all the talking to her little sister, who was however certainly quite equal to it.

"Mrs. Slade did the lectern, and Miss Elliston the pulpit, Miss Smith and Miss Davies the windows, and Lily the font, while Mr. Merton and I helped them all," volunteered the young lady.

"Important help yours must have been, Miss Edie," laughed her aunt.

"Yes, it's more to do the child. "I don't think," she continued, "that Mr. Merton liked the way Mrs. Slade did her part, for I heard him say to Lily just before I caught him up and being old Hannah her scrolling, that he hoped she would decorate that end next.

"Mr. Merton must have been talking nonsense; of course, Lily could not take [Mrs. Slade's part," said Miss Ashford, pitying the young girl's confusion. "I am sorry you heard it; she will be so sensitive about it to anybody; I hope you did not listen!"

"Why, of course not, auntie!" was the indignant disclaimer. "I wouldn't be so mean; only the snow drenched my foot-steps.

"That's right," said her aunt. "Now make haste and finish your tea, and then you and Mary can adorn the kitchen, drawing-room and hall, while Lily and I have a little quiet——"

"Yes, and you can get my presents ready while I am away," was the complacent re- joinder of the child, at which both her companions laughed and exclaimed simultaneously, "As if I don't know any better!"

Edie was now to play however with cake and tea to retaliate, and Miss Ashford and her elder niece were soon alone, the former comfortably reading a novel and knitting, while the girl subsided into a low lounge and gazed dreamily into the depths of the Christmas fire. A subtle change seemed to have passed over her; a month ago a merry child, now the rippling laughing brook was left behind, and the tide of her life, young though she was, had evidently flowed into the depths of womanhood. For a while she sat motionless and absorbed, then suddenly rising, she knelt by Miss Ashford's side, saying—"Auntie, I have something to tell you."

"And what is it, my Lily? Why, child you are trembling; surely you are not afraid of your old aunt?"

"No, I am not afraid, but—Mr. Merton told—asked me this afternoon."

"Well, what did he tell, and what did he ask?" enquired Miss Ashford as here came an abrupt pause, and the blushing face was hidden on the elder lady's shoulder.

"He asked me to be his wife," came in a low voice.

"And told you he loved you, I suppose; it's a way men have, I know. But Lily dear," softly stroking the brown head, "he should have spoken to me first. You are so young—"

"But, auntie," interrupted the girl, eagerly, "Guy—Mr. Merton I mean, did not know I was so young, and indeed I shall be eighteen next month, and he was coming to see you to appear; and Miss Ashford, her spirits already light at the sacred account of the first Christmas, and then in heartfelt prayer that the Holy Child might find more and more room in each heart, till at last they were all His.

A touching little incident followed the prayer. Miss Ashford softly said—"At this season, let us remember those who are gone before us and are keeping their Christmas in Paradise."

No further word was uttered, but for some moments in that domely room the spirits of those who are in Paradise were present. To the young girls it was but their parents who in fancy stood before them; but to the mistresses and maid, grown old together, crowds of familiar faces seemed to have gathered, and in the parlor a fairy tale, leaving the sacred account of the first Christmas, and then in heartfelt prayer that the Holy Child might find more and more room in each heart, till at last they were all His.

A touching little incident followed the prayer. Miss Ashford softly said—"At this season, let us remember those who are gone before us and are keeping their Christmas in Paradise."

No further word was uttered, but for some moments in that domely room the spirits of those who are in Paradise were present. To the young girls it was but their parents who in fancy stood before them; but to the mistresses and maid, grown old together, crowds of familiar faces seemed to have gathered, and in the parlor a fairy tale, leaving the sacred account of the first Christmas, and then in heartfelt prayer that the Holy Child might find more and more room in each heart, till at last they were all His.