



THE CHRISTMAS TREE.

HERISH how fondly soever we may the relics of those essentially national associations which heralded in the Christmas season in years gone by, we are not the less disposed, when mourning the gradual disappearance of these our own time-honoured observances, to welcome the introduction of any foreign custom which may promise, in some degree, to compensate for their loss by adding lustre and interest to our cherished festival. It

is true that many amongst us may not cease to sigh for the merry days of old, and the boisterous revelry of which time has enhanced the charm and veiled the disadvantages. They may regret that the boar's head should have ceased to be either a desirable or attainable addition to our good cheer; that the masques and pageantry in which princes once condescended to take part should have been long deemed unworthy the advancing intellect of the age; that the principles of order should be so powerful an element in our constitution as to forbid the reign of Misrule, even for that brief span which formerly witnessed its authorised dominion; and as they look back to the pastimes which it will never be their lot

to enjoy, may feel, be their prepossessions Royalist or Roundhead, that the Puritans did us ill-service in waging a war of extermination against the merry-makings of old Christmas. Others, again, there may be, who, without any antiquarian respect for the habits and manners of the real olden times, or any desire to awaken them from their long rest, may yet lament the departure of those familiar relics which were endeared by their own youthful associations; they may long once more by the light of the yule-log, to be half-amused, half-tormented by mummers; may grumble that their rest is less and less frequently disturbed by the harmony of the waits; and grieve that we are becoming too

refined to admit the privileges of the sacred mistletoe. But let them not be unjust to the present, and the enjoyments it provides. If the lordly boar's head no longer smokes in the centre of our modern dinner-table, have we no lordly baron or knightly squire to supply its place? If no gay pageant assembles eager crowds to witness its magnificence, has not each homestead its own individual gala, its festival of affection? And last, but not least, what matter though the mistletoe be banished, if we have the Christmas Tree, whose fruits, far less evanescent, will, undoubtedly purchase many a kiss, not stolen, but given as a free-will offering.

For this last picturesque innovation, now so completely a feature of our English Christmas, we are indebted to Germany, where it has held the same high position in general favour for years, we might almost say for ages; indeed, if we may credit the testimony of a well-known foreign print, representing Christmas in the household of Martin Luther, the illuminated tree afforded amusement to the children of our great reformer himself. The first instance generally known of the importation of the custom to our own country was during the embassy of Prince Talleyrand, who neglected no means of rendering himself popular and prominent amongst us; the reputation of the splendid tree which commemorated Christmas in his household spread far and wide at the time, and is no doubt still remembered by many. It was not, however, until the Royal marriage had established a kind of brotherly relationship between ourselves and our German neighbours—and by rapidly increasing the intercourse between the two nations, had rendered their habits and manners familiar to us—that this characteristic of a German Christmas was decidedly engrafted on our own. Since then it has gradually taken root in England; Royal example having given it fashion, and its own merits ensured it favour. There are now probably not very many families of which the elder branches are moderately enterprising, that do not establish a Christmas Tree; which, though ostensibly for the gratification of the younger scions, proves a source of interest and pleasure to all. There are, of

course, various degrees both in the beauty of these trees and in the amount of enjoyment derived from them (two points wholly independent of each other); and though each one must have a certain individuality of its own, yet they may be generally divided into two classes. First, perhaps, in splendour, are those summoned up without even the exertion of a thought through the potent intervention of Messrs. Fortnum and Mason. We know there are persons in the world who eschew trouble even when it takes the guise of pleasure. Happily for them many pleasures are to be purchased "ready-made," and our now popular Christmas diversion is of the number. There was a time when the annual display of Twelfth-cakes was esteemed well worthy a visit of inspection, but their attractions sink into complete insignificance before the curiosities and novelties in the form of, Christmas Trees with their adornments, a glimpse of which at the right season fills up an idle half hour very pleasantly.

For the advantage of those whose sphere of personal observation may be limited, but who may have their own reasons for feeling interested in the subject, we shall notice a few of the improvements which have been recently introduced: the benefit of them is chiefly confined to our first class of merry-makers—those who enjoy the result, but have nothing to do with the means. First, then, it must be understood that the Christmas Tree is by no means invariably one that Nature would acknowledge for her own production; indeed, the greater number of those that are supplied, ready dressed, are imitations—very good ones, be it understood—formed of painted tin. Hitherto, the comely and symmetrical fir-tree has served as a model; but, in the coming season, a novelty is to be introduced, consisting of imitative palm-trees, varying from two to six feet in height, in which the hand of Nature has not been disgraced by that of the artificer. There is the notched and gracefully tortuous stem, overhanging with the long green pendent leaves, which fall so judiciously over each other as to provide for the proper distribution of the lamps, or ornamented tapers which are attached to the points; a row of hooks, placed on the under side of every leaf, enables the ornaments to be disposed in close proximity, without injury to the general outline. Another design, equally new and pretty, represents a vine trained on a trellis, bearing large bunches of grapes, composed of coloured glass, but not on this account less tantalizing to the eye. Of half the elegances and grotesqueries which are invented for the dressing of this elaborate groundwork, it would be impossible to make mention, for their name is legion. All are, however, receptacles for bon-bons, but so curious and ornamental in themselves that their original destination might be easily overlooked. We can have boxes in the semblance of dogs' heads, and may even choose between the aristocratic greyhound, surly mastiff, and faithful Newfoundland; or, for those who may prefer fac-similes of their own genus, there are half-length figures of sailors in their glazed hats, Saracens in turbans, crusty old men, good-tempered young ones—in fact, characters of every kind, to whom the hand of the Nuremberg workman has imparted a degree of expression that is really marvellous: but all these form receptacles for a store of good things, which are exposed to view by the process of decapitation. The tree is not, however, to be overloaded with these oddities: amongst them are dispersed pretty miniature representations of familiar objects, as book-cases, guitars, balloons, &c.; also, gelatine flowers of great beauty, with gold leaves, made in Paris for this very purpose; and any odd corners are filled up with artificial fruit and similar trifles. To each of these articles is attached a number, and their possession is determined by lot. The principal and best manufactory, both for the trees themselves and for their adornments, is acknowledged to be Nuremberg, which has long enjoyed an established reputation for the ingenuity of its toys, many of which are made by the nimble fingers of children. The prices charged by the importers for the decorated trees range from one to thirty guineas, according to their size and the number and value of the articles which are placed upon them. All are in their degree tasteful and pretty, and can be said to lack nothing, except that particular interest which can only be purchased at the expense of a little trouble.

We must now glance at the second class of Christmas Trees; those of home growth; and ascertain if they have not some peculiar advantages of their own, to counterbalance their inferiority in elegance. In contradistinction to those individuals who do not make acquaintance with their tree until it has assumed its full dress, are a large proportion of aspirants for enjoyment, who would on no account relinquish the preparations to professional hands. They embark in the undertaking with the sensible resolution of extracting from it all the pleasure which it is capable of affording; and the amount, in a large family especially, is by no means contemptible. On our domestic tree comparatively little money is expended, for it is soon discovered that the trouble and ingenuity so willingly bestowed, go very far to supply its place. It may occasionally be made the medium of conveying handsome presents destined for many a year to recall the memory of the day to their possessors; but these can scarcely be considered as part of the legitimate expenses; and, as a principle, the productions of the tree are of an inexpensive character—often labours of love. For weeks before the long-looked-for day, the leisure occupations of those who may have taken upon themselves the responsibility of the affair, have reference to its success. Many an hour is stolen from sleep and the social circle, for the secret manufacture of these same presents, half the charm of which would be lost to the donor if the glance of admiration with which they are received be not equally one of gratified surprise. Many a walk is taken for the purpose of choosing the pretty bon-bons and ornaments which cannot be made at home, or dispensed with altogether. Even amongst the children there is an unwonted cessation of noisy activity, for they, too, have their own important affairs to arrange. They have to select from their own toys those that are to grow on the tree for the benefit of the little cousins who will be of the merry Christmas party; their generous impulses being no doubt rather quickened by the prospect of fresh acquisitions

for themselves. They have to determine the division and employment of the hoarded half-crown, and pay many a visit to the bazaar ere it is laid out to the best advantage. Lastly, there are the book-marks, intended to minister to the intellectual tastes of papa and mamma, to be completed and delivered in to the authorities on the eve of the great day. It will in truth be fortunate if its arrival do not surprise them ere the various plans are fully matured and realised. We should here observe that the time selected for the lighting up and grand exhibition of the Tree depends on individual taste; but as it most usually forms the crowning pleasure of Christmas Day itself, when the circle of assembled friends and relatives supplies a meet audience, we may conclude that the preliminary arrangements are made on the preceding evening. A select committee, consisting of those who are recognised authorities in matters of taste, closet themselves, with the various appliances of their business, in the back drawing-room, or wherever else may be the theatre of exhibition. How gaily they enter on their appointed task of decking the dark spreading branches of the vigorous young fir-tree, which, to afford full scope for their genius, should be some six feet in height. The first step is to attach the coloured tapers, by means of large pins, or any better expedient that can be devised. It may, perhaps, prove no easy matter to persuade them to maintain their appointed attitudes, and avoid all the risk of the illumination progressing into a conflagration; but if the candles do not look quite as much at home on our tree as on those of a more artificial character, they will at least give as good a light. Then the bon-bons, sweetmeats, flowers, and any other pretty things that may have been provided, are suspended from various parts of the tree, with those presents that are of a sufficiently light and ornamental description. The residue are gracefully strowed around, as though they had been showered down by the benevolent hand of some good fairy. During these proceedings, which have occupied considerably more time than their description, general curiosity has been exhibited outside the door to ascertain the progress of affairs; for, be it understood, there is "no admission for any one excepting on business." Idlers would only interfere with the industrious; and for the children, above all, the *coup d'oeil* is reserved until to-morrow; they would not have half the respect for the marvellous tree if they had beheld it unadorned, and discovered that it differed in no respect from those which they often carelessly passed in their country walks. The appeals of little eager voices for "just one look" are therefore entirely disregarded, and the plots laid by mischievous brothers to steal in on some specious pretext are disappointed by wary caution on the part of the besieged. It is ordained that all shall wait till to-morrow, and, fortunately, there is too much excitement going on in every household on Christmas Eve for the delay to be very irksome, or the interval to seem very long.

There are, we should hope, not very many who do not wake to the dawn of the Christmas Day morning with an indistinct consciousness that something pleasant is about to happen; and with the children this something speedily assumes the form of the Christmas Tree. Its prospective glories will present themselves to the best-regulated juvenile minds during church time, and not even the unwonted pleasure of dining with parents, aunts, uncles, and all the dignitaries of the family, is sufficient to prevent many an exclamation of joy when this preliminary is at last over and the moment of fruition arrived. The tapers lighted, and finishing touches given, the folding-doors are opened or curtain raised, and the Christmas Tree, in all its dazzling magnificence, is exposed to view. The admiration is so absorbing, that for many minutes it shines and glitters in undisturbed glory; but at length there is an evident desire to realise the existence of the treasures by actual possession, and to the most humorous of the party is entrusted the duty of distributing to every one their allotted portion, with appropriate remarks of his own.

Now are all those mysteries and hours of seclusion explained and accounted for to the general satisfaction. Every one would seem to have had his own especial secret; even the heads of the family have privately added at the last moment love tokens to their children, whose surprise they not a little enjoy. There may be (we say not that there is) a watch for him whose ambition it has so long been to possess one; a concertina or drawing-box for her whose tastes may render such a gift acceptable; and so munificent an assortment of dolls, with every appliance for their comfort, that the little ones forget to breathe one sigh of regret as they see their own generous intentions realised, and treasures, once the most cherished, pass into other hands. Nor are the juniors without their own moments of triumph; how pleased is the affectionate mother, when the beautiful, braided table-cover worked by the hands of her daughters is presented to her; and yet it scarcely meets with more consideration than the book-marks and the needle book. We must certainly relinquish all idea of enumerating a tithe of the gifts that are interchanged, for it really seems that each one has remembered everyone else, and has been by them as carefully remembered. Finally, the bon-bons are distributed as a *bonne-bouche*, but the tree must not be entirely dismantled on this occasion; some time should elapse before it ceases to be an object of interest; and surely another Christmas will be almost at hand ere its glories fail to prove an agreeable and ever-fruitful topic of conversation.

We have endeavoured to give some little idea of the distinctive characteristics of the two classes of Christmas Trees, as we see them in England; and now without offering any ungracious comparisons, we bid farewell to our readers of every age, desiring for them all possible enjoyment from their own Christmas diversions, be they foreign or be they of home growth; and, in the time-honoured words of our ancestors, wishing them each and all

"A MERRY CHRISTMAS AND A HAPPY NEW YEAR!"