

DECEMBER.—CHRISTMAS-DAY ON THE PAVEMENT.



Of the festivals and anniversaries which we are wont, in the course of the year, to celebrate with especial honour, there is scarcely one which, had it escaped our recollection, we should not be able, on its arrival, to detect, from some feature peculiar to itself in the aspect of the public streets. When merry bells are ringing from every steeple, and flags are waving from the summits of public buildings; when skeleton crowns, and as yet, untransparent transparencies, salute us on every side, and all the town seems wending westward, we do not require a reference to the last Gazette to satisfy us that it is the day appointed for the celebration of Her Majesty's Birthday. When, on a dark morning, towards the close of the year, we find ourselves unable to penetrate to our City engagements through the host of sight-seers who are pressing eastward, regardless of fog and mud, we do not require to be told that the day has arrived for the annual apotheosis of Civic Majesty. The Feast of St. Valentine, in its turn legible as print, in the window of every stationer's shop we approach; the most unobtrusive street wanderer can require no warning of Twelfth Day: while the unwonted gloss of novelty which pervades the apparel of the holiday-makers encounters on Whit-Monday, proclaims that Feast, as clearly as though every garment were a public advertisement of the fact. Even Christmas-day—so peculiarly the festival of home feelings and fireside joys, that it would seem to possess but little in common with the turmoil and bustle of the external world—is as distinguishable in its out-door dress, as any of the anniversaries which have preceded it in the year. Should we entertain any doubt upon the subject, we have only to sally out and satisfy ourselves.

It is on the stroke of eleven as we turn our steps eastward: yes! eastward it must be, for it is in the working-day world of town that we must look for the characteristics of which we are in search. Hyde-park-gardens and Belgravia turn not out of the even tenor of their every-day existence, be the occasion ever so moving. It is the misfortune of Fashion—ill-starred goddess that she is—that what is the relaxation and enjoyment of the ordinary world, is her daily toil and labour: she has no holidays. As we turn our steps, then, Cityward, the bells are ringing a cheery welcome to church, and streams of happy faces are responding to their bidding. Were it not for the branch of red berries which the green-grocer's boy is carrying down the area next door, and the apparition of the postman—that wanderer who seems to know no rest—we might fancy that we had retraced the course of time to some genial Sunday in the spring of the year. There is, however, something not altogether Sabbath-like in the aspect of things around us. Railway carts are busy in delivering hampers, which, it is to be feared, ought to have reached their destination on the preceding day; and the grocers' shops in by-streets continue to exhibit, in opulent profusion, masses of currants and stacks of raisins, for the convenience of improvident housewives, who may have failed to lay in the needful supply of those delicacies on the previous night. If such there be, however, they have no time to lose in completing their purchases; the church bells have ceased ringing, services have commenced throughout the length and breadth of the land, and myriads of voices are at this moment raised in accents of praise and thanksgiving for this holy day. We shall, however, observe nothing of that half-deserted appearance which characterizes the streets during morning service on a Sunday; for, as twelve o'clock approaches, the public thoroughfares are as crowded as they were at eleven. Clerks of genius, great-coated, comfortered, and railway-wrapped, as though bent on a polar expedition, are luxuriating in the fragrance of the "justly celebrated havannahs at seven for a shilling," and wondering at the air of novelty which being out at so unwonted an hour imparts to the streets they know so well. Attentive mechanics and sturdy labourers are doing their best, by a walk in the fresh air, to acquire an additional zest for the twelve pounds of roasting

beef, etc., which twenty weeks' self-denial, and subscription to their club-procures for them to-day. These, after all, are the genuine enjoyers of the season—to them the Sunday of the year. They have no bills to make up, with book debts of dubious value, like the worthy tradesman before them; nor is their enjoyment of the day impaired by any visions of similar unliquidated liabilities of their own, as may be the case with the gentleman with the rough coat and short meerschum who is now passing. They are too well used to the uncertainties of life to have any solicitude about the future; they have a good dinner before them to-day, and with that knowledge are abundantly satisfied. How different is the deprecating manner with which you old man seems to appeal for excuse even for the liberty of participating in the free air of heaven. Who could mistake him?—a pauper from the neighbouring workhouse, enjoying, if enjoyment it can be called, his only holiday in the year. There are few, however—and it might be some consolation, could he but know it—even of those whom Fortune has used most kindly, who will see out this anniversary without their share of its shade as well as of its sunshine. To all of us, Christmas-day is as it were a resting-place between the stages of a weary march; one of a series of landmarks on a lengthened journey, so prominent and conspicuous that we can cast our eyes back from one to the other to within a short distance from our original starting-place. The companions who travelled with us, the varied vicissitudes of our march—nay, even the feelings and hopes associated with each stage of our pilgrimage—rise up before us with startling distinctness as we look back upon it. That life has been a happy one indeed, in which such a retrospect brings with it only pleasure. We shall be safe in affirming that the party ahead of us has not yet arrived at this point in the day's experiences. They are on the "sunny side of the wall." It cannot, surely, be one family! No. Those two respectable, middle-aged gentlemen are evidently both heads of houses; so we will divide the rest of the party between them, taking care, for the sake of the picturesque, to apportion on opposite sides the younger male and female members who compose it. The youngest male unit, that urchin with his hand in his pocket, is, I imagine, somewhat in the way; his ebullitions of delight at the prospect of total idleness and late hours for three good weeks to come, have been but feebly responded to by his companions; nay, the damsel has snubbed him twice distinctly. He will, no doubt, retreat, to bestow his society upon the old folk; their conversation must be far less important, and they can, therefore, better afford to be tolerant. The mamma, it is to be observed, is not in either case visible; she, probably, "on hospitable thoughts intent," is busily occupied with the important domestic avocations of the day, and will be beheld by no mortal eye, till she makes her appearance, just before dinner, in all the glories of her best black satin.

As one o'clock strikes, the morning idlers begin to wend their way homewards, while those who have been employing their time more profitably, and have just come out of church, occupy, for a time, the walks they have begun to desert.

As two o'clock approaches, the streets begin to assume their busiest aspect, and we come upon one of the most important features of the day—the Diner Out! There is the first we have met, yon thrifty lady, with dress tucked up and basket in hand; she is probably an intimate friend invited to come early, and receive the guests; or a poor relation, perhaps, with a genius for custards. Soon we notice one or two more provident seizers of time by the forelock, coming intermittently, like the first drops of a shower of rain, till the stream becomes continuous. Nearly every one we now meet seems bent on testing the hospitality of every one else; the mystery is, who are the entertainers. The diner out of Christmas-day is markedly distinguishable among the ladies, from the circumstance of their always presenting themselves, cap in hand, like a debtor to a dun. What distinctions of taste in this important article of female costume should we not discover if these whity-brown coverings could only be removed for a moment. Every variety, doubtless, we should find, from the cap that really is a cap, and means something, with a proper allowance of net-work and yellow flowers, such as we may imagine to be the object of care, with that respectable matron over the way; to the coquettish contrivance of wire and ribbon, studiously designed to look as little like what it is as possible.

Another marked feature of the day in the streets is, that there is scarcely one of the people we meet who is not the bearer of some substantial evidence of the genial influences of the season—they are all carrying gifts, like the Kings of Sabea. There are the donors of albums, pencil-cases, and similar conventional testimonials of regard, who seem desirous only of marking their general sense of the duties of the day by a gift of some sort, without deeming it necessary to exercise any peculiar discrimination in its selection. Others there are—but they are chiefly ladies—who exhibit considerably more judgment in the matter; and as of this class we may set down the bearer of that large tea-pot, which, though ingeniously muffled, presents its features with a distinctness wholly independent of concealment. The gift is one which, under ordinary circumstances, would hardly suggest itself as a Christmas present; and yet we might venture to affirm that there are deficiencies connected with the tea equipage of the friend for whom it is intended, which, could we know them, would satisfy us of the appropriateness of the gift. The papier mâché work-table, which the young gentleman before us is bearing with so much care, would also at first sight appear a rather out-of-the-way tribute of regard. It is awkward to carry, and inconvenient for the purpose of presentation. But how good-humouredly he toils under his burden, and how carefully he guards it from injury: were it his own offspring it could scarcely receive more tender treatment. Stay! That is the secret! It is one of a description of gifts very common at the present day, a present in kind—a specimen of his own handiwork—the result, no doubt, of many a weary hour's labour, and many an anxious hour's thought. Is it intended for a married sister, or destined to serve as a propitiatory offering to the mother of some one in whom he takes a nearer interest? This question, must remain unsolved.

The strokes of each successive quarter after three o'clock, warn us more and more distinctly that we have accomplished the object of our walk, and shall now find little to amuse us abroad. The day, which has been bright and genial, begins to draw in, and looks as dark and cheerless as the most enthusiastic admirer of seasonable weather could desire. The pedestrians have, comparatively speaking, disappeared, and the limited business operations of which the day admits, almost exclusively connected with the agreements of the table, will, during the next two hours be entirely suspended. The period for the delivery of those lumbering delicacies which are dependent for their perfection upon the baker's good sense; and the tray of the confectioner, with its *entremets*, has not yet commenced its circulation.

Now and then some delinquent *early diner* that should be, hurries by, fiery red with haste, in all the agonizing consciousness of being twenty minutes late, with a punctilious hostess; or a perturbed lady, for whom we stop a Paddington omnibus, causes us a moment's disquietude, by persisting in depositing herself in an "Elephant and Castle;" but, with these exceptions, the monotony is almost unbroken. From five to seven there will be an increased bustle in cabs and carriages conveying the late diners to their engagements; and then, save the occasional vagaries, leniently to be judged, of some worthy who has enjoyed the day, "not wisely, but too well," all will be quiet for the rest of the evening.