

# Christmas Crackers.



**I**F there is one thing inseparable from Christmas in general and the little ones' seasonable gatherings in particular, it is—a cracker. With what a delightful look of expectation they have waited for it to go “bang,” and how they have screamed as they scrambled after the surprise which came in response to the explosion, and revelled in a complete outfit in the way of paper garments, hats and caps, jewels, toys, puzzles, and what not. But there are others who love the cracker. Have you not seen them? She is merry eighteen, and he with just enough moustache to twirl.

They each seize an end of that convenient little cracker—“bang” it goes. Why doesn't he pick up the gaily decorated paper cap, or she the piquant little apron with the blue bows? Simply because there is a tiny slip of paper inside, and they are eager to read it. That little scrap of paper may say:

“The sweet crimson rose  
with its beautiful hue  
Is not half so deep as my  
passion for you.  
'Twill wither and fade,  
and no more will be  
seen  
But whilst my heart lives  
you will still be its  
queen!”

and the next mo-

ment they are in the quietest corner of the room. It was Cupid himself who hopped out of that cracker. Christmas crackers have much to answer for.

Considering the many moments of merriment which these small rolls of paper will surely bring, and the countless chats



“BANG.”

on courting topics they are sure to give rise to, we are inclined to hasten from romance to reality, and take a peep in upon the workers whose busy fingers provide the crackers—in short, to find out exactly how they are made, from the moment the paper arrives at the factory to the time the completed article is ready to be packed up in dozens and sent away. Messrs. Tom Smith & Co., of Wilson-street, Finsbury, are really the creators of the Christmas cracker as we now know it. About forty years ago a sweetmeat and love-motto was wrapped in a piece of fancy paper, and in those days answered the same purpose as Christmas crackers do now. They were called "Kiss Mottoes." Then it got converted into "Somebody's Luggage," and finally the elaborately got up Christmas Cracker of to-day. Oscar Wilde did much, however, for its welfare. Even the crackers caught the æsthetic movement and became wrapped up in æsthetic colours. Messrs. Tom Smith & Co. manufacture eleven millions in a single season. Our own country will claim some eight or nine millions of these, and the remainder will get scattered over the world, India claiming a big parcel.

The first room visited at their immense factory was on the ground floor. Here is a miniature quarry. Hundreds of stones imported from Germany are stacked everywhere. Men are busy in the far corner grinding and grinding them until a perfectly pure and level surface is obtained. If you feel inclined you might endeavour to raise from the floor the largest litho stone used. It measures sixty inches by forty, and would turn the scale at a ton. The stones are then passed on to the litho artists, for lithography plays a most important part in the manufacture of a Christmas Cracker. Upstairs is the artists' room. Clever artists are constantly engaged in making fresh designs year in and year out, and it is nothing extraordinary for some of them to spend weeks in completing a single set of designs. The literary work, too, is no small

item, and a man who can write good verse can earn good money. Ladies seem to be the most adept at this sort of thing, which is paid for at so much a set of verses. Mr. Walter Smith, who accompanied us on our tour, goes to a desk and takes out a handful of sheets on which all sorts and conditions of bards have written. Some of them are very funny. Here is one, which is immediately waste-paper basketed :—

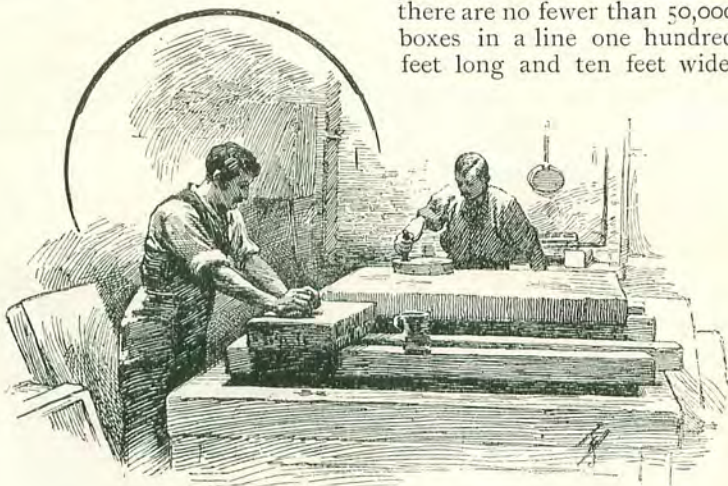
"Whilst sweets are eaten, and crackers cracked,  
Naughty boys are sure to be whacked."

The poet asked five shillings for this, and offered to supply them in unlimited quantities at the same price.

The next one is a gem, and is at once accepted :—

"Half hidden 'neath the spreading leaves,  
A purple violet bent its head ;  
Yet all around the moss-grown path  
In love its fragrance softly shed.  
My living violet, whisper low,  
That o'er my life your fragrance sweet  
Will make a garden of my life,  
Where love its counterpart may meet !"

We now pass through innumerable avenues of Christmas crackers, all in huge parcels. In one stack alone there are no fewer than 50,000 boxes in a line one hundred feet long and ten feet wide.



"GRINDING LITHOGRAPHIC STONES."

This represents a month's work, and every one is sold. We can quite realise this when we are told that one retail firm alone in London will send in such an order for crackers that it would take sixteen of the largest delivery vans built to convey them, with 1,200 boxes packed away in each van. It is no unusual thing for an order of £500, £1,000, or £1,500 worth of Christmas crackers to be received, the biggest of all totalling up to £3,000, the highest in the trade. This

reminds us of the number of cardboard boxes which must be needed. The box-making is a distinct industry. A plant of machinery for their manufacture costs anything between £2,000 and £5,000, and during

litho machines are running, for the most part presided over by men assisted by girls, who certainly take off the sheets with marvellous rapidity. One machine is printing funny faces to go outside the crackers, another is turning out sheets with hundreds of flowers on it, and yet another is giving us countless little Cupids. Every rose and Cupid is cut out, and it is the same with any other picture with which it is intended to decorate a cracker.

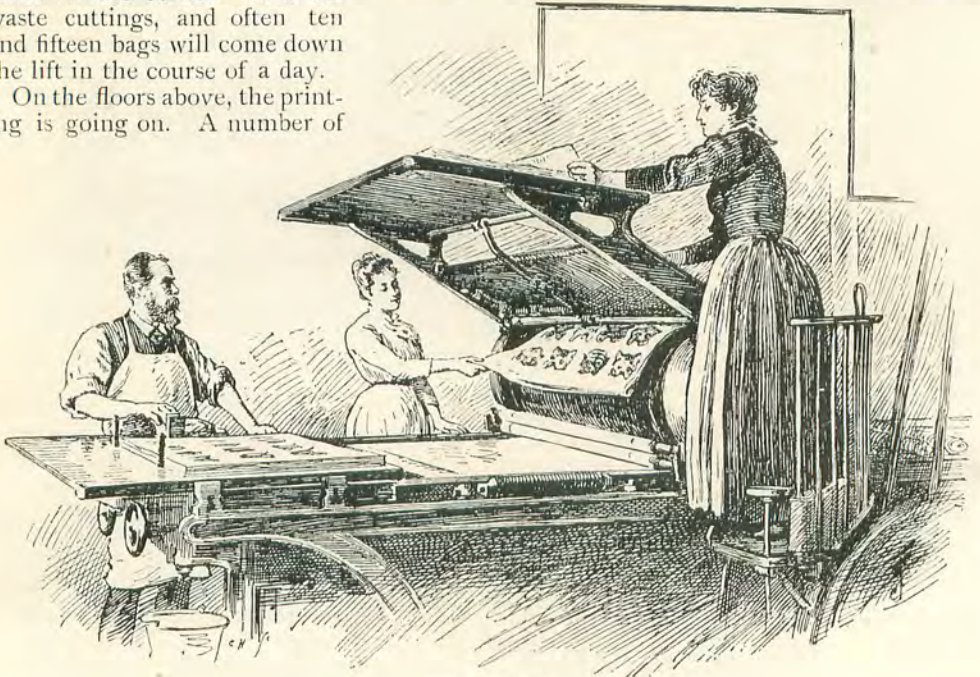


THE PARCEL DEPARTMENT.

a busy week 30,000 would be made and used in that time. The card is all cut to shape and stacked away, and the patterns are many, for there are over 150 varieties of boxes. Just look at this pile of sacks in the corner. It is all waste cuttings, and often ten and fifteen bags will come down the lift in the course of a day.

On the floors above, the printing is going on. A number of

We shall be safe in saying that the contents of crackers come from every part of the world, and a peep into the store-room where they are kept in huge bins and great boxes, will substantiate this. On one corner of the counter are thousands of tiny pill boxes. These are filled with rouge and powder,



PRINTING MASKS.

with a little puff thrown in. Such are the contents of one of the "Crackers for Spinsters," those estimable single ladies also being allotted faded flowers, a night-cap, a wedding ring, and a bottle of hair dye. This pile of bracelets came from Bohemia, fans from Japan, toys from Christiania, with little wooden cups and saucers from the same place, scarf-pins from Saxony; the little miniature pipes, as played on by the accompanist to a Punch and Judy show, are made by Parisians; Jews' harps come from Germany, and tiny wooden barrels from America. The familiar flexible faces which can be squeezed and pulled into every conceivable shape are made in London. Hundreds of little glass bottles are here, supposed to be filled with a certain intoxicant known as gin. A young girl is filling

Turkey, India, China, and South Africa all contribute to the store. The sight would set a child pining with pardonable envy to play about this part of the factory.

To enumerate every item which



"FROM ALL QUARTERS OF THE GLOBE."

finds its way inside the crackers would call for a catalogue the size of *THE STRAND MAGAZINE*.

We are now on our way to the top of the building where the Christmas cracker is really made. First, there is the giving-out counter. Here come the girls and receive into their hands a certain quantity of what is wanted to make the particular part on which they are engaged. Every strip of paper is counted. Close by the giving-out counter a number of young women are fringing the edges of the paper to be rolled. This is done on a small machine capable of taking four thicknesses of ordinary paper and six of the brighter-looking gelatine. The material to be fringed is put against the teeth of the apparatus, the girl stamps it, and it is ready to give a neat and gay appearance to either end of the body of the cracker.

The main workroom presents a busy sight. It is nearing one o'clock, when the dinner bell will ring, and the hands are

them with the very reverse of anything intoxicating, although the label on the bottle says "A 1,000,000 overproof." Italy,



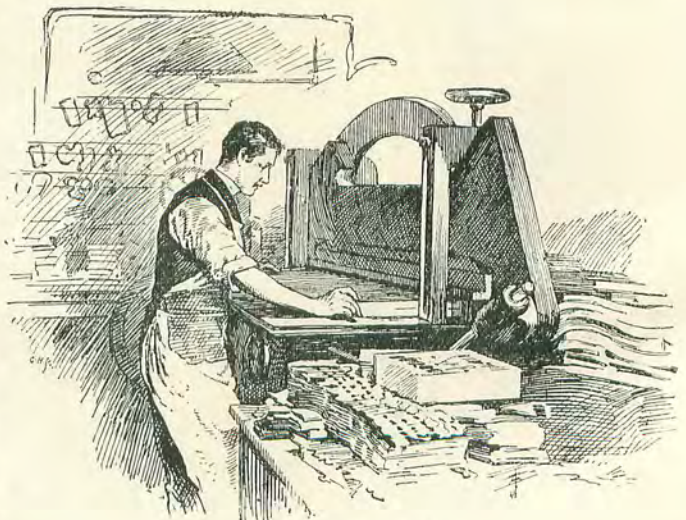
FRINGING.

working at high speed so as to finish their self-allotted task ere the bell tolls. Four hundred feet of benches are ranged from end to end of the room, and here are scores of girls sitting in front of partitioned-off spaces ranged along the lengthy counters. Every girl has her glue-pot by her side. Turn round and look at the immense stove where twenty pots are being constantly warmed up, so that as soon as a worker's glue cools down she has only to cross to the stove and there is another pot ready at hand for her. It is noticeable how cheerful the young women are and to what a superior class they apparently belong. A good cracker hand can easily earn 14s., 16s., and at a busy time 18s. a week, and the cracker trade of this firm alone means the constant employment, directly and indirectly, of close upon 1,000 people.

One young woman is rolling the paper — paper of all the colours of the rainbow are before her, and dozens of completed crackers are arranged in front waiting to be carried away, and the manufacture of them booked to her credit. The paper is rolled on a brass tube, so that a trim appearance is obtained. Coloured string ties it up, and the gelatine is quickly placed round it. The girl

we were watching said she could roll two dozen "best work" in a quarter of an hour, though she could do commoner work much quicker. Her next door companion was blessed with busy fingers. First she took a slip of paper—this was the inner lining; round this she wrapped the gelatine, added two decorating ends or fringes, and then put in the detonator, the explosive paper tape, and it was ready to receive its contents. She could do a gross an hour. Her fingers travelled faster than the pencil in our note-book. Passing girl after girl, we find them all surrounded by the brightest of colours in gelatine and paper. One is making paper dresses for a doll, a neat little white tissue frock trimmed with red braid. This formed part of rather a novel box of crackers. A good-looking doll is placed in the box, and each cracker has some article of attire inside, so that when every one was "pulled" the doll could be provided with a complete outfit. Others were making hats and caps. The paper is rolled round a tin to shape, pasted together, and there is your *chapeau*. All is very simple, but nothing could be more effective when the article is completed.

The cardboard alone used in the manufacture of the empty boxes in which the crackers are packed exceeds a hundred tons in weight during a single season, and the tiny strips of card constituting the detonators over five tons. Twenty tons of glue and paste, between 6,000 and 7,000



CUTTING THE PAPERS.

reams of coloured and fancy papers are used, whilst the total weight of the thin transparent sheets of coloured gelatine, which add so much to the brilliancy of a Christmas cracker, amounts to nearly six tons.

The process by which gelatine is manufactured is a most interesting one. The raw gelatine comes over in five hundred-weight casks from Switzerland. It arrives on these shores in thick, rough sheets, measuring six feet by three feet, weighing



MAKING CRACKERS.

about three to four ounces each. It is then reduced to a liquid by steam power; water being added, it is clarified, and while in its liquid state dyes of the richest hues are poured in to render it of the shade of colour desired. While the gelatine is thus in a liquid form, it is poured upon frames of glass, measuring twenty-four inches by eighteen inches, much resembling

window panes. Workmen, by the movement of the glass, allow the melted gelatine to spread over it, and so form a sheet of uniform thickness. These sheets of glass are then arranged in stacks, and the film of gelatine allowed to set. When the gelatine sheets are hard upon the glass, they are then transferred to a room in which a strong current of air is allowed to pass in and out, to complete the drying process. This takes from twelve to eighteen hours, after which a knife is run round the edges of the gelatine, which then being cut with a knife peels easily off the glass, and is now ready for use.

We were curious to know what was the biggest cracker ever made. Crackers are made three feet long, containing a full-sized coat, hat, collar, frill, whiskers, umbrella, and eye-glass. A story is told of a well-known



MAKING CAPS.

member of the aristocracy who entered a West-end shop one day and saw one of these gigantic crackers. He inquired the

couple to put on, and a multitude of crackers, which were thrown amongst the children in the audience.

size, and when he heard it, exclaimed :

"Three feet ! Not big enough for me. Just you order me three dozen crackers, each six feet long !"

The six feet crackers were made and delivered. Whether the nobleman congratulated himself on the fact that he had obtained the largest cracker up to date we do not know, but the biggest of all was that made every night for Harry Payne as clown to pull with the pantaloons in the pantomime at Drury Lane. It was seven feet long, and contained costumes large enough for the merry

