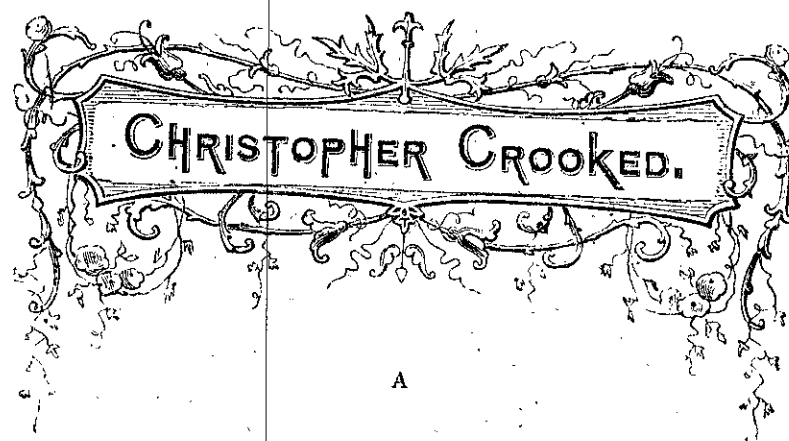




"Merciful Father, thou who reignest on high."

See page 55. •



A

CHRISTMAS STORY.



BY

W. E. HATHAWAY.



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Introduction.



THE name which stands at the head of this page, with the exception of the first part, was not the real name of the individual concerning whom the following history has been written, but was given to him for reasons which will hereafter appear.

His real name was Christopher Raymond—his father's namesake—a more Christian appellation, which, however, was long discarded by every one except his own mother, who could never bear to hear him called "Crooked Christy," as the nickname was frequently transposed, and would always weep if

she heard it mentioned. Christopher was the first child, and only boy, that ever blessed or cursed the union of his parents; and it so happened that they had first met on a Christmas day, were married exactly one year from that time, and our unlucky hero first saw the light on that same memorable morning, on the three hundred and sixty-sixth day thereafter.

In all the preparatory stages, therefore, which led to him as a result, and in the event which first ushered him into being, he might emphatically be called a Christmas product.

His father was the son of a wealthy merchant, and, to draw it very mildly, was a gay young fellow, who much preferred society to business, and was regular in nothing save in his drafts upon his own worthy sire's exchequer.

It was, therefore, a great satisfaction to Christopher Second's grandfather when he discovered the fact that his son was in love with Flora Bowen; and he seconded his wish to marry and settle down, with a liberality and heartiness that was very comforting to the young man.

"For," said old Mr. Raymond, "Flora is a fine girl, worth two hundred thousand, at least; and when Chris gets her, he may attend to business, and stay at home."

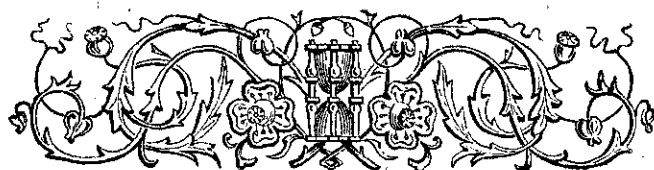
So saying, he mused, like an indulgent father

as he was, what he could do to make the young folks happy; and it was his suggestion that decided them upon having the wedding on a Christmas morning.

"It is a good day on which to begin," said he; "and, besides, we want a beautiful Christmas dinner, any way. Why not have the wedding then?"

There was no good reason why not, and so it was agreed.





I.

Wedding-Bells.

THE Christmas morning came, cool, crisp, and clear, as Christmas ought to be, and a bright company of "fair women and brave men" assembled at Christ's Church to witness the ceremony that should have joined two hearts forever.

We all know it. Every school-girl in her teens remembers how the solemn service runs, and, with a sacred awe, looks forward to the day when she shall kneel at such an altar, and lightly whisper, as the rector utters them, the words that pledge her life "to love, honor, and obey."

As they passed down the aisle and out of the Church door, over the flowery carpet which had been laid to the carriage, every body said, "How beautiful!" And if a merrier company shall ever sit about a festive board than gathered then

around the grand long table, may we be there to see. If fatter turkeys ever shall be sacrificed to human appetites, stuffed with more tempting morsels, or oysters more resigned and placid float in their native liquid, or celery hold up its head more crisp and cheery, or pumpkin pies beam with a broader smile—why, then, may a kind Providence grant good digestion, and may we all be there! And to all these the shining silver and more shining eyes add glowing luster; for how much better tastes a bit of turkey or a calm oyster when gobbled with a silver fork than from an iron spoon; or how much sauce does conversation lend to appetites, already sharpened by long fasting and the brisk air of a Christmas morning!

Let those reply who can—who, from a full experience, can estimate the added gratification of dining with the fair. 'Tis said that even glum dyspeptics, on such occasions, can down the sourest pickles and the hardest of bolognas without a gripe of anguish; and willful men partake, with easy grace and smiling faces, of viands which they otherwise detest.

That this is partly true, we know by personal sensation; and here it shall be written, in the true scientific spirit of our day, as so much known of actual phenomena. But, not to turn

away from the less taxing subject of our story, we call* to mind some other graces which lent their charms to that occasion,—the paintings on the wall, the marble statues which looked down upon that company from bashful niches, and spoke, in silent language, of love and beauty.

And, side by side, two faces, old and grave, but touched with mild benevolence—the ancestors of the present house of Raymond, now resting on the other shore—regarded, with approving glances, this festive gathering.

And so the feast went on; and stately turkeys were hewn down to shocking *débris*, and great mountains of vegetables disappeared as if by magic, and many an oyster lost his identity forever, until, at last, the ruin was complete. Yet the battle was not ended, if the vigorous onslaught upon these heaped-up viands may be so dignified; for no sooner was victory declared than new re-enforcements appeared upon the scene. A silver ship came in, floating upon a raging sea, wherein were briny monsters and dark reptiles such as only roam the hidden caverns in the mystery of the deep; but gayly manned, and freighted with the choicest fruits, and nuts so sweet that angels well might envy the appetites of men.

Bright yellow oranges from the far Mediterranean; figs from India; raisins, almonds, and big

brown Brazil-nuts, enough to make a body burst for envy of those tremendous fellows whose capacity of stomach is so very much beyond the average. And, besides this, the ship brought in a cask of wine, already tapped, the lightest and most delicately flavored over which any old bibber ever smacked his lips; and in a silver cask, at that, and hooped with bands of gold. But over this presided a figure—what, let those tell who know—with glittering eyes of emerald—whether imp or devil, man or beast, we can not say—holding in its hand a cup, half drained, at which it gazed, with horrid grimace. And well it might; for at the bottom, sparkling in the wine, lay coiled another image, more ugly, horrid, and terrible to see; with fiery eyes, sharp fangs, and fearful claws, as if for tearing out the very vitals of him who swallowed it. And a snaky body, wrapped in many a fold.

“Swallowed it?” you say. Yes, swallowed it; for whosoever drained the goblet dry must take the viper, too; and thus the image halted between fright and passion, and longed to drink the wine, yet durst not, nor neither could he cast it down and fly the hated presence of the crawling thing which fixed his sight.

“And now,” said Raymond, senior, “we must drink the health and happiness of Chris and

Flora. May they live long and prosper! And every child high Heaven grants to them, inherit all its father's spirit and its mother's grace!"

So saying, he turned to draw the wine, but started, at the sight of that queer shape, and said:

"The saints defend us! What have we here? Some imp, escaped from the infernal regions, or a petrified fairy devil?"

At this there was a general rush to examine the image; and so skillfully had it been wrought, that all drew back, and a cold shudder ran through every frame. At last old Mr. Raymond said:

"But we must have some wine; and here goes! Who drinks with me?" But not a voice replied, as, with a shaking hand, he turned the faucet, and the fragrant liquid gurgled into the cup held to receive it. "Who now?" he said again, as he held the sparkling liquid up for the sun's rays to strike through it.

"I, if no one else," said Christopher; "that image yonder is modeled after some old witch's fable. Hand me the glass."

But, ere he took it, Flora laid her hand upon his arm, and said:

"Do n't do it. That image yonder is my design, and I had hoped its lesson might have been sufficient. Do n't do it, for my sake."

"Indeed!" said Christopher. "Why, love, you're

quite an artist. *I must certainly* drink your health upon it."

"And drink the viper, too," said Flora.

"Viper, my dear? That's all in your imagination. I'm not afraid of all the vipers in this wine-cup; so here goes to your health, my love."

A cloud passed over Flora's face; but in a moment the spirit of the company was again restored, while the wine went round, and many a joke was cracked, along with nuts, over the little devil of the wine-cask. Only Flora left her glass untasted; and so it stood at last, when the ladies had withdrawn and the gentlemen had lighted their cigars.

Christopher noticed it. "Soho!" said he, "my little wife has left her wine; I'll drink it just for luck. So here's to the devil of the wine-cask; down with it, boys!" And they clinked their glasses, and drank the toast right heartily.





II.

How it Was.

THIS is how. A gay young couple, every body said, moved into a splendid house on High Street, and no hearth-fire in all the city burned brighter than their own. No cozier parlors, or more easy chairs; no finer carpets, or walls adorned with rarer gems of art. And, last of all, no fairer bride in all the land received her New-Year's callers than Flora Raymond.

There are those who would say that she was proud; but what of that? If she did greet her visitors with an outstretched hand, on which there flashed a fortune's worth of jewels, it was warmed with blood from a heart as true as ever thrilled through veins of woman. And if she did ride in her carriage, with a footman behind and before, it was what she had always done, and she thought no more about it. One thing she did not do; she

did not tempt her guests by offering wine. And at the risk of being counted singular—that monstrous terror wherewith the king of fashion compels obedience—she refused to set it on her table. And if ever place was found wherein two human beings could have known complete enjoyment, that should have been the home on High Street; and if ever wife was given to a man who should have bound his heart to her in willing bands of love, that wife was Flora Raymond.

But scarcely had the wedding-chimes ceased ringing in the steeple of Christ's Church, and scarcely had the solemn vow been spoken, when he who should have been the guard of this choice gift, began to slight it; and he who should have kept the heart he pledged himself to cherish, began to break it.

Less than a month had passed ere the young wife was left, for low companions of the baser sort; the heaven of home, where home was well-nigh heaven, for such resorts as were as well-nigh hell. Day followed night, and night succeeded day, only to bring again the round of watching to those weary eyes, only to tear afresh wounds in that bleeding heart. All the fine hopes which had been built upon the prospect of this marriage, by the elder Raymond, were doomed to disappointment; and the proud man began to fear his son

would bring his gray hairs down in sorrow to the grave. And now he sought, by every means, to win him from his haunts. Followed him to the dens, where peaceful night is shocked with drunken orgies. Plead with him, as a father only could, to shun the wine-cup. Strove to inspire his heart by every thought of honor, sense of shame, or hope of earthly gain, to dash it down. But all in vain. His only answer was: "Did you not ask me to drink with you on my wedding-day?"

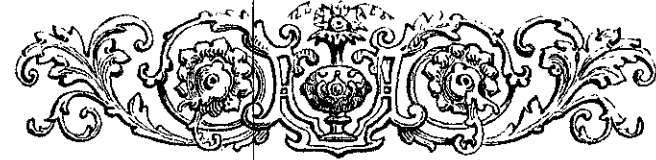
"Why, yes; but then I thought you were a man, and not a beastly drunkard," replied the father, with great bitterness.

"And so I was," the wayward son replied; "with all my frolics, I was never drunk until that night; and it was you who drew me on, and made me sell myself, against the will of her whom I adore, to the devil of the wine-cask. Now I'm a slave, and helpless to resist the power that drives me on. The furious, raging demon in my breast has full possession of me, and I must have wine or die. So here's to the devil of the wine-cask;" and he drained the goblet dry.

And, with a mocking laugh, as if it echoed from the tomb of death, the young profligate threw himself with more wild abandon into the deep vortex of ruin and despair.



FLORA.



III.

A Night of Terror.

ONLY three months a bride," said Flora, "and already I am bowed with an unspeakable sorrow. Where can Chris be to-night?" she said, as she leaned her head sadly against the window, and peered out into the gathering darkness. "I fear it is to be a stormy night; and why, I can not tell, but a dreadful terror haunts me. Why I should dread this night more than any other of the many in which my sleepless eyes have watched for his late coming, I do not know; but darkness and despair seem gathering round me; vague and undefined, but dreadful and almost unbearable. I must have company;" and she stepped to the door and rang a bell. Presently a little maid appeared. "Did you ring, ma'am?" said the girl, who was a queer specimen of humanity—about as broad as she was long—with a square little head, and small

gray eyes that maintained a perpetual squint. "Did you ring, I say?" she repeated, as Mrs. Raymond did not at first notice her.

"Yes, Susan," she replied, turning slowly toward her. "Tell Katy to come to me."

"Yes ma'am," said the child, and proceeded on her errand.

Mrs. Raymond seated herself again by the window, and strained her eyes to catch sight of every passer-by, vainly hoping that each one might prove to be the object of her anxiety; and repeatedly disappointed as, one by one, they all hurried past.

At length the storm broke forth; and vivid lightning flashed across the sky, or seemed to descend and sweep along the ground in blinding sheets of flame, while the very earth trembled with the appalling thunder.

"What an awful night it is!" said Flora, as she drew the curtain and placed a chair for herself in the middle of the room. "I do wonder where Chris is through all this storm. Heaven protect him! Why don't Katy come to me?"

Just then the faithful servant opened the door, and asked:

"Do you want me, Mrs. Raymond?"

"Yes, Katy; stay with me to-night until Mr. Raymond comes. I don't know why, but I am as weak and fidgety as a child, and my mind is filled

with evil fancies. I half imagine something dreadful is about to happen; but, of course, I'm nervous, I suppose. But stay with me, any way. There, sit down;" and she pointed her to a chair by the register.

"It's an awful night, to be sure, Missis, and an unlucky day, too, for all that; and I eenmost being supposin' something is about to happen myself. Leastwise, the dog has been misbehavin' hisself dreadful this afternoon."

"There, there; don't begin to tell me any of your silly superstitions, Katy, or I shall go quite distracted. It is enough for me to bear the fears I have, without supporting such nonsense."

"Laws, Mrs. Raymond, I just knew last night that something was the matter; for I could hardly sleep one blessed minnit of the whole night, for a mouse gnawin' at my head in the wall."

"There, hush now, Katy, or I shall send you out of the room. I can't endure it; and, besides, it's utter foolishness. I sent for you to help me still my nerves; and now, instead of that, I'm ten times worse than I was before."

And so the two sat there in silence, while the little carved clock on the mantle went on, tick, tack, for hours together; and Katy nodded heavily, and finally fell fast asleep. At last Mrs. Raymond thought she heard the sound of wheels; and,

going to the window, listened more attentively, and now she was sure that she heard footsteps approaching the house; and she had hardly time to arouse Katy from her heavy slumber, until the bell was violently rung, and the girl was sent to open the door. Katy gave a little scream of fright as she did so, and Mrs. Raymond sank into a chair, while her heart almost stood still as she waited to see who would enter; and as two men came forward, bearing between them the helpless body of her husband, she almost swooned in agony of terror.

"Is he dead?" she asked, frantically, as she recovered herself a little, and commenced wringing her hands. "O, tell me, is he dead?"

"Dead! yes!" said one of the men, with heartless cruelty; and then, as he saw how fair and how unutterably wretched she was, he added much more gently, "But only dead drunk."

"God help me!" said Flora, and this time really fainted quite away. Katy ran to her, and lifted her up, while Chris was left to lie upon the floor; and the two men only remained to see her slightly recovered before they took their departure, leaving what should have been a home of peace and sweet security, as full as it could hold of wretchedness and shame.

As soon as possible, the two women had sum-

moned John, the coachman, and, by his assistance, the prostrate man was laid upon the sofa; and such means employed as they could devise, to help his rugged nature to throw off the effect of the intoxication. The gray streaks of early dawn were spanning the eastern horizon, however, before the sleeper could be roused from his drunken stupor; and then he began to curse and mutter, and finally sat up, and tried to stagger across the room to his miserable wife. If it had been hard for Flora to see her husband dead drunk, it was now a trial ten times more severe to see him stagger to and fro across the floor, and hear him mutter words of fond endearment in the imbecile condition which he now displayed. She could not endure that her servants should witness this humiliating spectacle, and preferred to be left alone with him, whom now she could only regard with mingled fear and pity. But when they were gone, she could restrain herself no longer, and burst forth in a most uncontrollable flood of tears; whereat the driveling wretch began to weep most bitterly also, and call upon her in beseeching tones to dry her tears, and cover her face with a thousand tender kisses, all mixed with fumes of liquor, as they were, and to protest that she was still his dearest, darling idol.

How her poor heart had hungered, since her

wedding-day, for only one expression of his love ; and longed to break that cold, hard barrier down that kept fast barred the entrance to his heart ! O, how priceless would have been these words, if only spoken in his sober breath ; how sweet and welcome these fond kisses, if only free from taint of wine ; how thrilling this embrace, if only love, unmixed, had been thereby expressed !

But should she now tear herself away from him, thrust him from her, deny his whim ? She could not do it ; and, as a tired child yields at last, she sunk into his arms, and sobbed her sorrow out upon his breast.

And then they slept again, at last, and only woke when the bright sun had mounted high in heaven, and thrown his flood of light over this world of darkness and despair ; and rousing then to consciousness of what the night had wrought, endeavored to shake off the spell of darkness, and to look forth upon the future with a brighter hope.

But Chris—as every body called him—was quite unable to rise, and kept his bed for many weary days ; while Flora scarcely left his room, and nursed him with a fond devotedness that could not be excelled.

During these days of suffering and love, Chris vowed, by every name both great and good, to shun the tempter's power ; and fully meant to

prove as faithful, as his words were earnest and sincere.

Why need we, then, dwell on his wretched failure, or draw aside the screen intended to conceal the shame and bitterness of disappointment which his wife endured ? It was the old, old story, with which, alas ! the world already is but too familiar. Let the curtain fall.





IV.

Premonitory Symptoms.

THE pretty, carved clock on the mantel pointed to the hour of six P. M., and just as the small door at the top flew open, and the jolly little cuckoo commenced his merry chirp to announce this solemn fact, the hall door opened suddenly, and a frouzled head of red, coarse hair, and a small, square face, with very short pug-nose, and a pair of squinting gray eyes, were thrust through the crack.

"I say, missus!" said Susan; but just at that moment she caught her foot in an unlucky fold of the rug, and fell sprawling on the floor.

"Mercy on us, child!" exclaimed Mrs. Raymond, starting up, in agitation, "you'll be the death of me yet, I do believe! What's the matter?"

"Nothing, ma'am," said Susan, gathering her-

self up from the floor, as if she was very much in doubt as to which part of her ought naturally to attain the perpendicular; "nothing, ma'am, only the doctor's in the library."

"O, is he?" she said, seating herself again in her low arm-chair, and drawing a light shawl about her shoulders. "Well, has Mr. Raymond returned?"

"No, ma'am; and John says he can't find him high or low."

"Well, tell the doctor to walk up-stairs," said Flora.

"That girl is enough to scare the very life out of me," she added, as the door closed behind her. "I really think I must send her away; only I don't know what would become of her, if I should."

Just then there was a gentle tap at the door; and Mrs. Raymond said, "Come in," expecting to see the doctor; but, instead, there walked in a portly dame, of perhaps five-and-thirty, who said:

"Mrs. Raymond, I suppose?"

The latter regarded the woman with some surprise, but inclined her head in token of the affirmative.

"Exactly so," pursued the woman. "Allow me to introduce myself; Mrs. Hasty, private nurse and midwife; recommended by Dr. Slater,

who, I believe, is your physician. You are likely to require professional services soon, Madame?"

"Sooner than I expected, I fear," said Mrs. Raymond, as she shook with a slight, nervous chill.

"Just what I thought. May I ask if you have a nurse engaged?"

"Mr. Raymond promised to attend to it; but I am not sure that he has, and—"

"Then I think I can assure you that he has not; for, to my certain knowledge, he is not in condition to attend to any business."

"Have you seen him? Where is he?" said Flora, eagerly.

"Only had a glimpse of him, on the street, as I came here to-night; and I miss my guess if he was n't jolly drunk."

"O, heavens!" said Mrs. Raymond, while an expression of pain contracted her face. "Really, I believe I shall die to-night! I never shall live through this."

"Nonsense!" said Mrs. Hasty; "this is Christmas eve, and no time for dying! You must cheer up! I see I must not leave you."

And so saying, she began to lay off her shawl and bonnet, and make other preparations for making herself comfortable. Mrs. Raymond regarded these movements with curious indifference, but

turned her glances anxiously to the door, where she momentarily expected the doctor to appear.

At last he came, rubbing his hands professionally, and bowing, with the utmost suavity of manner, to Mrs. Raymond.

"Well, Madame, and how do you find yourself to-night?" he asked, addressing his most interesting patient; but stopped short, as he discovered Mrs. Hasty, and exclaimed: "What, you here already, and comfortably established! I must say, but you take time by the forelock! Why, when do you think our little traveler will arrive?"

"You are certainly complimentary, Dr. Slater," said Mrs. Hasty, bowing slightly. "Did you ever know me to be behind-time in such a race as this?"

"Never, upon my word," replied the doctor. "But have a care," he said, laughing heartily, "or you'll wind yourself, this time, before the race begins."

"As to that, we're on the course already, or I'm mistaken. You'd better tend your patient, and let me alone."

"Crusty as ever. But never mind; perhaps you're right," said he, and turned again to Mrs. Raymond.

"O, doctor," said the latter, "shall I employ this woman? Did you send her?"

"Yes and no," he answered. "Keep her, by all means. She's a trifle queer, but a better nurse never coddled a baby. However, I did not send her, but should have done so if asked to name a suitable person."

"Then it is all right," said Flora, turning to Mrs. Hasty. "You may consider yourself engaged."

"Law, Mrs. Raymond," said the latter, who was in the act of adjusting an apron, which she had taken from her basket, "I settled that a quarter of an hour ago. But now, I reckon, I'll find my way to the kitchen, and get a little tea. There's nothing like it for settlin' one's nerves for such business as this."

"Just like her," said the doctor, when she was gone; "but a faithful creature, you may depend upon it;" while Mrs. Hasty proceeded to the kitchen, and astonished Susan and Katy by her sudden and unlooked-for appearance.

"Here, you," said she, addressing Katy, "get me a cup of tea, right quick now, and mind and have it strong. Put in one teaspoonful of green, and one of black; it improves the flavor wonderful."

"Yes ma'am," said Katy; and she commenced to execute the order.

"And who be you?" said Susan, who could not repress her curiosity.

"Manners, Miss, manners," replied the nurse. "Don't forget your manners; but I'm Mrs. Hasty, your mistress's nurse."

"Well, you do have a hasty way with you, to be sure," said Susan, tossing her head to one side, and regarding the nurse with one of her most diabolical squints.

"Hey-day, my young one; I wonder your mistress allows you in the house," said Mrs. Hasty. "She would n't, either, if she knew any better, I dare say. Why, you're enough to twist the best baby in the world into a perfect fright; and I miss my guess if the coming stranger isn't a curiosity of crookedness."

"Ha, ha, ha!" laughed Susan, giving her face a few new contortions, and squinting her eyes with more distressing perversity. "If it's a boy, his name is to be Christopher, and then we'll call him Christopher Crooked. Ha, ha, ha!" and she sat down on the floor, and looked up saucily at Mrs. Hasty.

"Who told you that?" said Mrs. Hasty.

"Nobody," answered Susan; "but I saw his name worked on the pin-cushion in the basket up-stairs, what's got the clothes in it for him."

"I believe you're a witch," said Mrs. Hasty.

"I wonder if I am," said Susan, as she once more assumed the perpendicular, on her feet.

"But that's a fact, any way. The pins was stuck in the cushion so as to spell 'Christopher.'"

"O, that is what you mean, is it? Well, bring me my tea as soon as it is ready. I must hurry back to Mrs. Raymond."

So Mrs. Hasty went back to Flora, while Susan flew to fetch the tea. But as she came into the room with it where Mrs. Raymond sat, weak and nervous, she managed to stumble over a foot-stool, and fairly upset herself, tea and all, upon the floor once more.

This gave Mrs. Raymond such a fright, that she fainted quite away. And while the doctor applied restoratives, Mrs. Hasty fairly rolled Susan out of the room. And, judging from various ominous sounds, she may have performed the journey to the bottom of the stairs in the same manner.



V.

A Child is Born.

THERE were lights in that north-east room all night, and flittings to and fro along the dimly-lighted halls. From the kitchen to the garret there was, apparently, a general stir. Even John sat up and fed the furnace fire, and Katy never left the kitchen, but kept the tea-kettle in a constant state of ebullition.

As to Susan; where was she not? From the kitchen to the key-hole of her mistress's room, she performed more journeys on that night than can ever be recorded; until at last she had the misfortune to encounter Mrs. Hasty in the hall, upon one of these raids, and was forthwith locked up in a clothes-closet.

Just as the Christmas-chimes began to ring, however, in the steeple of Christ's Church, and just as the little cuckoo in the clock came out

to welcome in the Christmas morning, a feeble cry was heard within that room. Pity poor Susan was not at the key-hole to take note of it. Otherwise the anxious watchers in the kitchen need not have waited for ten mortal minutes, ere they heard the joyful intelligence that "the child was born."

A little later, and the door-bell rang, as if some benighted stranger was in haste to find a shelter; and, when the door was opened, Christopher Raymond came staggering in, brushed past Katy in the hall, and, without a word, ascended the stairway, reeling from side to side, in momentary danger of tumbling over the banisters, and sought his wife's apartment. As he stepped into the room, Mrs. Hasty was just wrapping the baby in warm flannel, and the doctor had administered a quieting draught to his patient, who was lying there, pale and more beautiful than Chris had ever seen her look before—with her luxuriant black hair streaming over the white pillow, and in deep contrast with her marble face.

"O, Chris!" was all she could utter, and her voice choked with weakness and emotion; and then she reached her hands out pitifully toward him, while her face entreated him most beseechingly to come and sit beside her. The man advanced a step or two, and then stood, half bewil-



SUSAN.

dered, gazing on the scene before him. At last, she whispered: "I've been wanting you all night long, and wondering where you were; and it did seem to me I could not meet this trying ordeal unless you were beside me. O, Chris," she added, "I did so hope you would be with me in my agony, and I could have borne it all far easier than just the thought that while I suffered here you were away; and—no, I can not say it. Come to me, Chris."

At this, the man took still another step toward her; but he could not walk with steadiness, until the doctor placed his hand upon his arm, and led him to the bedside, where he sat him down. And, taking in his own the small white hand she reached toward him, he kissed it tenderly, and burst into a flood of tears.

"I know you love me," Flora murmured; "I know you love me, Chris. See there, that is our baby—my baby—yours and mine; and this is Christmas morning, do n't you know it?"

And still the man wept bitterly, and fairly washed that little hand with the hot tears he shed upon it, until Flora spoke again, and said:

"Don't you remember, Chris, that it was just one year ago to-day that we were married? Hark! the Christmas-bells are ringing now, just as they rang that morning. And you little

thought then, I know, that we should have our cup so filled thus soon with joy and sorrow. Mrs. Hasty, bring the baby here, and let us see it."

Mrs. Hasty nestled up the precious bundle and carried it to the bedside, while Flora drew away her hand and lifted the white flannel from its face, saying:

"Look, Chris, it's a boy; and a fine fellow, too, the doctor says. We must call it Christopher, if you will promise me here, over him, that you will never drink again."

"Promise you, my love?" said Chris; "I'll promise any thing you ask; only forgive me for my shameful conduct, and tell me that you love me as of old."

"Indeed, I do love you, dearest; and now we have this precious treasure, it may help you break away from the evil spell that binds you."

"Say bound, not binds," said Chris; "for from this day I will break off the accursed habit, and tear myself away from my slavery to the devil of the wine-cask."

"God grant it, love!" said Flora; and she lay back again upon her pillow, while a look of peace and hope stole over her weary features.

"I think," said the doctor, advancing slowly, who had all this time maintained a restless silence, "that you ought to rest now, Mrs. Ray-

mond. I trust your husband may achieve a victory over his appetite; for if ever man had cause or reason to be brave and true, he has, with such a wife."

"God help me," said the wretched man, seizing the doctor's hand, and wringing it. "Isn't she an angel? And I have been a brute to treat her as I have."

Just then a dismal howl broke in upon their ears, as if it came from some deep cavern or subterranean cell—a wail, half human, half demoniacal, that fairly startled every one, and broke the conversation off as short as if a thunderbolt had riven through the house.

"In the name of all that's holy, what is that?" said Chris, starting up, suddenly. "Is the devil fairly on my track, and mad with rage because I've slipped his power?"

The doctor cast an uneasy look toward his patient, while Mrs. Hasty only laughed, and laid the baby on the bed, saying:

"I quite forgot the little imp, but I'll go and fix her." And she left the room, closely followed, however, by Chris, who yet could not make out from whence the sound proceeded.

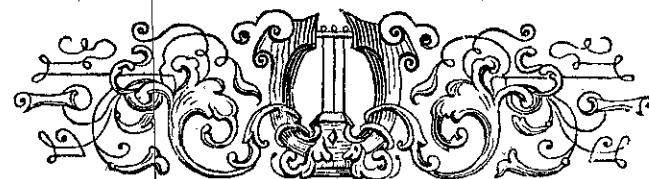
Mrs. Hasty led the way immediately to the clothes-closet, and turned the key. And no sooner was the door slightly opened, than Susan

made a dash at it, with flashing eyes, and her coarse, red hair standing in every direction, like a Patagonian savage.

Mr. Raymond was still considerably under the influence of liquor, or had just reached that stage when his tortured nerves needed the usual stimulus to brace them up. At least, he no sooner caught sight of Susan than he uttered a scream of fright, saying:

"It's the devil himself!" and turned quickly to run down the stairs.

Susan was at his heels; but, just as she reached the top of the stairs, she tripped, and came tumbling after him, in regular humpty-dumpty fashion, uttering all sorts of cries; while the poor man really thought the devil was after him, and broke away and ran into the outer darkness, howling with mortal terror.



VI.

Crooked Christy.

CHRISTOPHER RAYMOND did not do any better, in spite of all his fair promises. But a little more than six months after his child was born, his father died suddenly, leaving his entire fortune without a will, so that it naturally fell into his hands. It is unnecessary to dwell on this part of our history. The loving wife could not withhold from her profligate husband any thing that he asked, and, consequently, nearly all her fine property had been already squandered. Now, however, that he had come into possession of his own inheritance, she pleaded with him to set aside a part of it in such a manner that it could not wholly be wasted. But to all these entreaties he would answer with such confident assurance of his power to take care of it and her, that she felt ashamed to let him see how very

anxious she was about it, and feared to discourage him by any serious evidence of her distrust. And yet her judgment told her that they were on the highway to ultimate poverty and deeper depths of shame. And she shuddered to think of what would become of her and her child when what they then possessed was wasted, as a fortune had already been foolishly and utterly thrown to the wind.

For a short time it did appear as if her fears might possibly be groundless; for Chris succeeded to his father's business, and while the old order of things remained undisturbed, the wheels of trade moved on with much the same results. While the reliable old superintendent and salesmen stood faithful to their posts, Chris might employ himself for a time, driving fast horses, playing billiards, drinking wine, and spending the magnificent profits of the business, without materially impairing the credit of his house. But this condition of affairs could not, in the nature of things, be permanent; and it required only a few months to work a revolution in the system, that had ever made it possible. Now the day of trial was approaching.

One by one the old *employes* of the house withdrew, preferring to serve a more sober and less fickle employer. And the great house of

Raymond, which had been built up with untiring effort and on the most systematic principles to the very highest position, was destined to experience a sudden and most humiliating overthrow. On the very morning on which the crash came, a clear December day, Chris Raymond drove out with his wife in a magnificent carriage, drawn by four splendid black horses, with gold-mounted harness, and two footmen in livery posted behind. As this turn-out sped over the frosty ground, and the clear, bracing air of the morning brought the color into Flora's cheeks, hundreds of pedestrians turned to look after them with various emotions.

Some envied Chris his wife, others his fortune, and counted him a lucky dog and a capital fellow, if he was a little wild. But old men shook their heads, and passed along with an expression which said very plainly:

"We have seen all that sort of thing before, in our time. It won't work, young man; and we would n't be surprised if you were much nearer to the end of your rope than you imagine."

And so it proved; for when they returned from their ride, they found the sheriff waiting with his posse to receive them at the house which was no longer theirs. The black driver got down from his proud seat, and handed over the reins to the

sheriff's deputy, who mounted the box and drove away.

The crisis, which Flora had all along been fearing, had come at last. And when the cruel blow had fallen, its sorest consequences fell with most crushing weight upon the shoulders least able to receive them, and least deserving of the lash.

In this hour of their utter humiliation, none of the hundreds of friends who had visited them in their prosperity deigned to present themselves to offer sympathy and consolation, save one, a humble follower of Christ; who, though surrounded by the charms and lure of wealth, and listening ever to the siren's song, kept her heart always fresh and quick to sympathize with human woe. Now, though her step was feeble, and her hands less strong than they had been, and with gray hairs her head was silvered o'er, she came; the first and last to offer words of cheer, and bid the broken heart take courage and look up to Him who hears the cry of anguish, and can save, even to the uttermost, those who rest upon his mighty power. Then the stricken woman laid her head upon her breast, while, in a voice of pity that must have been like that wherewith the Master spoke, she prayed that God would look in mercy on her fallen state, and grant her strength in this great weakness; until the sweet

tones strengthened with her mounting faith, and rose triumphantly, as she implored Him by his power to lift this struggling soul above the tempest of adversity, and keep it safely under the shelter of his mighty hand.

"Now, I can tell you, Mrs. Matthew, of one sorrow more, deeper and keener than all ills besides, and hitherto secreted from the world. My child—" and then the pent-up grief o'erleaped its barriers, and burst away as a full flood, sweeping along the stored-up sorrow of that overburdened heart.

"Pray tell me all," said Mrs. Matthew, soothingly, when her storm of grief had somewhat subsided.

"Is an hereditary drunkard," said Flora, struggling to suppress her deep emotion.

"Impossible!" said Mrs. Matthew. "It can not be, and it so young! It certainly can not drink now? You do not mean it?"

"No, certainly not just that—worse, far worse than even that, I fear!"

"You amaze me! How worse? Can any thing be worse?"

"Perhaps not; but listen, then judge. My child gives every evidence of intoxication, and yet is never truly so. His look, his baby prattle, and his every act proclaim him an inebriate;

and yet God knows no drop of liquor ever passed his lips."

"And is he always so?" said Mrs. Matthew.

"Always."

And the two women bowed their heads and wept together.



VII.

Triplet Alley.

HIGH Street and Triplet Alley were at the social antipodes. The one the home of wealth and culture; the other merely gave space grudgingly to those who live because they can not die. But into such a place as this Chris Raymond was compelled to move, with his wife and child. And even here existence was precarious; for what could he do to maintain himself, much less his family? Nevertheless, they felt that they must hold on to one servant, at least; and who could this be but Susan? And Susan was glad enough to go anywhere with them, having certainly nowhere else to go.

It is surprising how certain exigencies will tend to bring out certain characteristics, and develop capacities which otherwise might have slumbered on unthought of till the end of time!

In High Street, Susan was little better than a nuisance; in Triplet Alley, she became almost the sole dependence of the family. Here she could play in the street as much as she liked, when there was nothing else to do, which was generally the case; there she had always to be ready to answer her mistress's bell, which was a great annoyance. And, what was of more account, here she soon recognized herself as the most important spoke in the wheel of the domestic economy; there she was simply endured.

All these things tended not a little to exalt Susan in her own estimation immensely, and she was in great danger of becoming high-minded and vain to a shocking degree; for did she not make regular trips with her basket to the back-doors of the very houses on High Street, wherewith her mistress was once upon the most familiar terms? and did she not carry thence to the narrow rooms in Triplet Alley the fragments from their tables, which was nearly their entire dependence for food, and the cast-off clothes which they bundled up for her, which constituted almost their whole stock of clothes? No wonder if Susan began to appreciate herself; and no wonder if she improved upon the lessons she was taught, and began to forage on her own account.

If she sometimes indulged in thoughts of severing her connection with the family which she thus clothed and fed, and did occasionally dream of setting up an establishment of her own, it is hardly surprising. In just such an independent spirit, do many young men gracefully withdraw from old, established houses, and set up their own smaller but equally ambitious pea-nut stands or corner groceries. All honor to them, and may good luck prosper them upon their several ways!

As to Chris, he was worse than nothing. To set himself to business was utterly impossible, as he had never done anything in his life, and was too proud to be willing to begin to learn now. He cheated himself, and tried to deceive Flora, with the idea that he was making arrangements for going into first this, and then another, very extensive business. But it never amounted to more than going about among all the friends and acquaintances he ever had, to borrow money, so long as they would lend him a shilling. This he either spent in drink, or lost at the gaming-table, to which he now resorted as the last desperate means for retrieving his ruined fortunes; and verily believed that, by some turn of the magic wheel, he should be lifted out of his degradation into independence and respectability.

All this while, the suffering wife bore her lot patiently, and really tried, as best she could, to do her part—nay, *all*—to keep their heads above the raging waters of poverty and shame. In this she was greatly aided by Mrs. Matthew, who visited her constantly. Suggested, by the most delicate allusions, what Flora could best do to advance their fortune. Seconded her idea to work embroidery, and used her influence to secure its sale. And thus, in many ways, besides contributing to her directly of money and provisions, managed to keep the little family in a tolerably decent and comfortable condition.

Thus another year flew by on silent wings, although it dragged full heavily and slowly to the wretched family in Triplet Alley. But all that time, the one sorest trial to the heart-broken mother was the sad condition of her child, which grew more strikingly evident as he increased in age. He learned to walk, but it was only as a drunken stagger; so like it, that you would declare the child was only then intoxicated. And he talked, too, but only as the drunken fool mutters incoherently to himself. And yet the child was not a fool; but, really, as bright as other children of his age. Learned every thing as readily, and was as full of warm affection for his mother, whom he caressed with every token of

his sweet endearment, but in a manner that never once allowed her to forget the first time Chris was brought home to her. And, often as the child would leave her, to go to his playmates in Triplet Alley, would the poor creature live over again that first humiliating scene; and shudder as she saw it acted and reacted over and over again by the child, in his unconscious imitation of that hour. And yet she loved him, and clung to him with a passionate affection, and never could endure to hear the children call him "Crooked Christy," as they always did, and fairly blazed with anger when they mimicked his staggering gait, and hooted after him as the drunken baby. Yet none were more to blame for this than Susan, who always set the children on, and laughed the loudest at the sport they made of him.





VIII.

From Bad to Worse.

THE reader will say, perhaps, "This is impossible." But, still, we doubt if ever human life has reached that lowest ebb, when truly one might say that nothing lower could be found. We doubt if God, in all his universe, permits a single living thing to be, of whom it can be said that this is wholly and unalterably bad. At least, on earth, we wait yet to discover a human soul in which there is not still a spark divine, that, meeting with the fire of heavenly love, may kindle to a flame and burn away the dross and dregs of sin.

Surely, at least, this could not, then, be said of Mr. Raymond. And yet his course was only downward, and no ray of promise shone upon the pathway that his feet were treading. How he learned that Flora was managing to earn a little



CHRISTOPHER CROOKED.

money—which fact she strove, however vainly, to conceal—it might be hard to say. But he did learn it; and from thenceforth he never let her rest while there remained one penny still in her possession. He watched her with as close an eye as ever hawk could follow the course of a fated mouse. And in this scrutiny he possessed a faithful ally, too cunning and too omnipresent ever to be evaded. And, besides, it became a useless task for Flora to make the effort to secure the merest trifle. For no sooner was a garment or an article procured which had the slightest value, than the misguided wretch sold or pawned it; and used the proceeds to procure liquor for himself, or staked it all upon the gaming-table where, finally, he was to win the fortune that still never came.

And, by such means as this, the family in Triplet Alley became reduced to lowest depths of poverty. And yet that faithful wife had never once withdrawn the gift of love she laid upon the altar when she became a bride.

Days came and went, and lapsed to months and years, and still their lengthening misery knew no relief. And yet, above all other sorrows, one stood supreme to Flora, who could have well endured the rest, but for this galling burden. She was nearly ready, several times, to

break away from Chris. But her fond heart could not consent to yield her husband to his fate. And so she clung to him, and suffered on; while gray hairs came to silver o'er her raven tresses, and lines of care and sorrow wore into deepened furrows down her velvet cheeks.

So five years sped away, bringing no change, but one continual drooping of her hope. Their home grew narrower, as, one by one, the friends of Summer days migrated, and forgot the tender bird they left to shiver in the wintry blasts; until, at last, as bleak December days drew on once more, they found themselves exposed to biting frosts—their only refuge a poor, wretched hovel, into which the driving snow was sifted by the cruel wind. And there, with hunger gnawing at their vitals, and the stinging cold mocking the poor defense their threadbare garments offered, they huddled close about a broken stove, wherein the last small spark of fire yet dimly flickered, and strove to warm their chilled and freezing limbs. In this last dire extremity, even Susan deserted them, and, with a high ambition and a worthy independence, struck out to seek a fortune of her own. Perhaps it was a blessing. For there being now not even so much as an iron spoon for Chris to pawn, he was compelled to stay at home; and, for lack

of means wherewith to buy sufficient liquor, he was, for a rarity, entirely sober.

It was a Christmas eve, and all the streets were full of happy people, hurrying here and there on joyful errands. Fair women, wrapped in furs, and with their hearts brimful of love for the sweet ones at home, who would awake upon the morrow in eager expectation of their Christmas-gifts; and sturdy men, who all day long are chained to books or counters, sped homeward with elastic steps, or stopped to fill their pockets at the confectioners with bonbons for the bright-eyed youngsters, who, with noses flattened 'gainst the window-panes, would wait to hail their coming. The merry sleigh-bells jingled, as the flying steeds dashed by, lending such music as one can only hear on Christmas eve; while every window blazed with a dazzling light, and reveled in such splendors as quite outrivalled Aladdin's famous show. At least, poor Christy thought so, who staggered, half bewildered, through the hurrying throng, and gazed upon the bright, enchanting scenes with longing wonder; and then crept off to his poor home in Triplet Alley, to ask his mother why it was they never had a merry Christmas.

As the boy came reeling toward his parents, his father turned to notice him, and for the first

time was impressed with his peculiar manner, and exclaimed:

"What, Christy, are you drunk, you little rascal?" At which the boy turned his head to one side and gazed upon his father with an idiotic leer, that would have been superb for acting, it was so real an imitation of himself.

Chris recognized it as such; and in an instant he conceived the thought that Flora had instructed him in this to shame his folly; and, in his anger, sprang toward the child with an uplifted hand, and a blind purpose in his heart, to punish him. But Flora was too quick for him; and, sheltering the poor child behind her own weak body, put forth her white hand with a gesture of authority, as she said:

"For shame upon you, Chris, to think of striking him for an affliction of which you only are the author!"

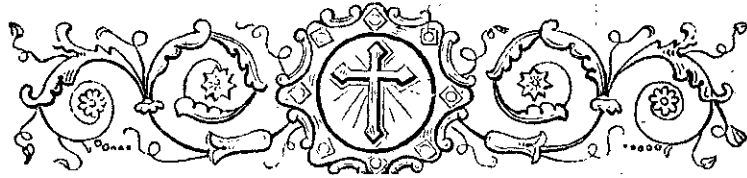
"An affliction of which I am the author! You talk in riddles!" he answered in astonishment. "Do you call that an affliction, when the little rascal mocks me to my face, and leers up at me with a drunken smile?"

"O, Chris," said Flora, "is it possible that you have never known my sorest trial until now, or noticed that this child has always borne the stamp of an inebriate? Have you never heard

the children of the alley cry after him, and call him Crooked Christy? Have you never thought that, on that woeful night on which they brought you to me, helplessly intoxicated, that then the fate of this poor child was sealed? If not, then look upon him now, and may God help you realize the curse you have entailed upon your child!' She paused; and, stooping, folded the boy in her arms, and wept over him.

Chris stood and gazed upon them for a moment, while his brows contracted with the effort of a mighty resolution. And then his eyes grew glassy, and his frame shook like a giant oak when battling with the storm. He stooped, and moved his lips, as if about to speak, but not a sound escaped them; then turned and strode away into the darkness, as one might go to answer at the judgment bar of God.





IX.

The Morning Night.

THE wind, which had been raging all day through the streets, went home, and shut itself within its cave; and the hush of night was muffled into deeper stillness, by the soft mantle that nature spread over the slumbering city. Silently, hour by hour, the snow-flakes fell upon the stony pavement, upon the house-tops, and against the window-panes; piling themselves in every shape fantastic, and blotting out the dark deformities that vex the weary eye. They fell in Triplet Alley, as softly as on High Street; and kept their virgin purity, and spread their spotless cover over its filth and wretchedness. They stopped the cracks about Chris Raymond's hovel, and its inmates slept; but still to dream of bright and cheerful fires, that tortured their imaginations, but gave out no consoling warmth.

But Chris was not among them; nor had he yet returned when the weary wife awakened, chill and miserable, to realize her utter want and desolation.

"Will he never come?" she said, despairingly; "and must I die here thus, while all the world is glad about me?" And then she knelt over her sleeping boy, and raised her voice in prayer:

"Merciful Father, Thou who reign'st on high,
And yet canst hear thy children's feebleest call,
Look down from heaven with thy pitying eye;
On us, O let thy tender mercy fall!"

And the morning sun, rising magnificently over the snow-clad hills, threw one cheering ray across the world's wide waste to that low hovel; and, stealing softly through the window, fell upon that kneeling form in that cold, comfortless apartment, bathing her long, loose hair and upturned face with a glorious effulgence.

The door creaked on its rusty hinges; and, turning suddenly, she saw Chris standing there, gazing upon her with such admiration, and with a look of pride and joy, that she had never seen upon his face before. His step was firm, and his eyes clear as light, and his face beamed as bright as hers in the glory of the sunshine. And in all her life he never seemed so noble, or filled her heart with such a thrill of joy.

"Come to me, love," he said, stretching out his arms toward her; "I have brought you home a Christmas-gift this morning; a very poor one but the best I could procure."

"You could bring me nothing half so precious as your sober self; and that I see you have this morning," said Flora, as he took her in his arms.

"Then I am very happy," Chris replied; "for that is all I have. But that, I pledge you, you shall have to keep so long as I have life."

And as they talked, the chimes in Christ's Church steeple rang out merrily upon the morning air, and floated away down to Triplet Alley, in softest cadence of their voice of praise.

"Listen," said Flora; "for the Christmas-bells are ringing; and they sound to me this morning as they did six years ago. And they do not mock my wretchedness, as they have done, or make me sad."

"And never will again, I know," said Chris. "But how about our breakfast? Is our larder wholly empty, as I half suspect?"

"It would be, if we had a larder," Flora answered, smiling; "and there's not a single mouthful of provisions in the house. But I'm not now one bit hungry, for the gladness of your coming; though I have n't had enough food for a week to feed a mouse. But never fear," she

added, "for I've asked the Lord to keep us; and just now, I am sure, he will send us what we need."

"But I can not share your faith, my dear," said Chris, with an anxious look toward the door. "I will go and see if I can not make a raise of something for our breakfast."

"You will please me best," said Flora, "not to go. Indeed, if you insist upon it, I've half a mind to go along. You can not think how much I dread to have you go away from me."

Chris guessed her reason, and so sat down and took her on his knee, saying:

"I know. You are afraid that I shall come home drunk again. But you need not fear; I shall not. But I can stand it as long as you can; and, if you bid me stay, I will obey. From henceforth you shall be my guide, as you have been my guardian angel."

And then the chimes rang out again, and all the bells throughout the city seemed to be at strife as to which could clamor loudest of the universal joy; and Flora fairly clapped her hands, which awakened Crooked Christy, who forthwith began to cry with cold and hunger, not having yet received a dispensation to allow him to live without food or fire. We know that it is popularly believed by many people, that

certain others can exist indefinitely upon so small an allowance of these comforts as to amount to almost none at all; but this delusion should be set down alongside of Brown's "vulgar errors," although those who entertain it generally class themselves among the highly bred.

There was one person, however, who had a clearer sense of what our human nature yet demands, and that was Mrs. Matthew; and, while a part of what we have been relating in the preceding chapter was transpiring, she was busily engaged in preparing a large basket of provisions. There were some loaves of bread, and a roll of butter; a large piece of ham, and some cold turkey; some pickles, and a can of oysters; a bottle of milk, some tea, coffee, and sugar; and, last of all, a pumpkin-pie, and some candy and raisins, for Christy.

"For," said Mrs. Matthew to herself, on Christmas eve, "I'll warrant Flora has n't had a good meal for a week, and she'll want a Christmas dinner. I must see that she has it. Poor thing! I wish I could do more for her. But nothing can be done so long as Chris is allowed to plunder her of every thing."

And then she called her coachman, and gave him instructions to be sure and carry that to Triplet Alley that night; but it began to storm,

and he was afflicted with a little laziness; and so it came about that the basket of provisions was wholly forgotten, until he happened to see it, on the following morning, when he came into the kitchen.

He did not hesitate any longer, but started off with it at once, and so arrived at Chris Raymond's door just as a cloud was gathering over Flora's face, for want of something to give to her hungry boy. The snow had prevented his footsteps from being heard; and, without stopping to knock, he suddenly opened the door, and said, abruptly:

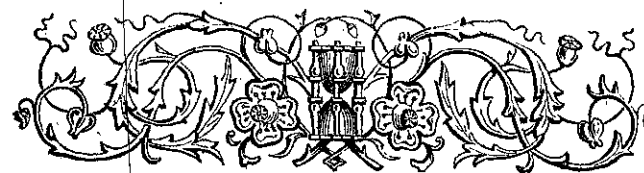
"Here's some things from Mrs. Matthew."

"There!" said Flora; "here's our breakfast. I knew it would come. See, Chris!" and she held up first one article, and then another, while tears of joy and gratitude streamed down her face; and Crooked Christy gyrated around the room, tossing his arms about wildly, and manifesting his delight in the most extraordinary manner possible.

Mr. Raymond could only sit still, in dumb astonishment, while his wife unpacked the basket; and, for the first time, he now felt how unbearably humiliating it was that his family should be in want, while he had strength to earn an honest living for them. Then he rose up and shook

himself, like some wild beast arousing from its slumbers; and stretched out his right arm, and looked at it, and raised it up to heaven, and vowed that by it and the help of God he would hew his way back again to fortune.

"Amen," said Flora. "That will answer for our grace. Come, let us eat."



X.

Ivy Cottage.

WE have neglected, until now, to mention that Flora was an orphan girl when she married Mr. Raymond; whose father, dying, had bequeathed his ample fortune to his only child, the idol of his heart. But she had an uncle living, a bachelor, and as churlish an old reprobate as ever hoarded gold for no known earthly reason. This uncle, Silas Bowen, was more wealthy than his brother; but kept himself apart from all the world, and lived, in glum seclusion, in some private chambers. By what means he had managed formerly to win the first advantage in the strife with fortune, matters not; but clearly now, he drew ahead upon the course, with easy strokes, that distanced all competitors. On change, he stalked about, a bull or bear, as pleased his fancy; and growled his deep defiance, or tossed

the smaller cattle with his horns, without the least compunction. Thus many a man owed Silas Bowen an old grudge, and longed to pay him off in kind; and no one had a word of friendship for him, or ever spoke his name, except to cast some odium upon it.

Once, in their time of greatest need, Flora had sought him at his office—a dirty room, at the further end of a dimly lighted passage, in an old rat-crib that stood beside the quay, where the ships lay moored in close fleets to the docks, and where he could look out and watch the gangs of men employed in storing their dark holds with merchandise; and here she meant to lay her wants before him, and ask him, for the sake of her dead father, to reach a helping hand toward his child.

But his voice sounded so harsh and loud, as he called down at the men below, and railed at them, either for their stupidity or laziness, that her heart failed her, and she crept away again without so much as rapping at his door.

It was just as well; for, had she stood before him, he would have turned her off, and with some cruel word to rankle in her breast. And now she kept the hope, that somewhere in his heart, there was a sacred chamber, closely locked and barred, it might be, and never aired, but

filled with generous love, and ready to be opened by whosoever might possess the magic key.

Now, Chris had kept his vow this time. And every day—as Crooked Christy reeled about the house—his own disgrace smote on him with a deeper shame, and kept his resolution firm to battle with his old temptation. And the man grew strong in noble purposes, and no task seemed too humble, if thereby he might obtain some gift or comfort for the angel of his home. For very soon, and thanks to Mrs. Matthew, they moved away from Triplet Alley, and took a cozy cottage, where there was a pretty yard, with evergreens, and ivy vines trained over door and windows. And Flora thought she certainly was never quite so happy. And the roses on her cheeks came back to rival those that grew beside the door. Still they were poor, for Chris could only earn a slender salary. But what of that? Were they not all in all, each to the other? And could they not endure this small privation, while their hearts were full of gratitude, and love, and buoyant hope?

And so the time sped on, bringing once more the cold December days; but brought no chill to the dwellers at Ivy Cottage, where the fire danced merrily, and the tea-kettle on the stove-hearth sang its quiet tune of happiness and undis-

turbed content. The evergreens in the yard were bending low beneath their fleecy burdens, and the snow-birds hopped about among their branches, rustling down small avalanches of the shining crystals; while the morning sun threw its golden radiance across their drooping limbs, studding their virgin drapery with a million gems of light.

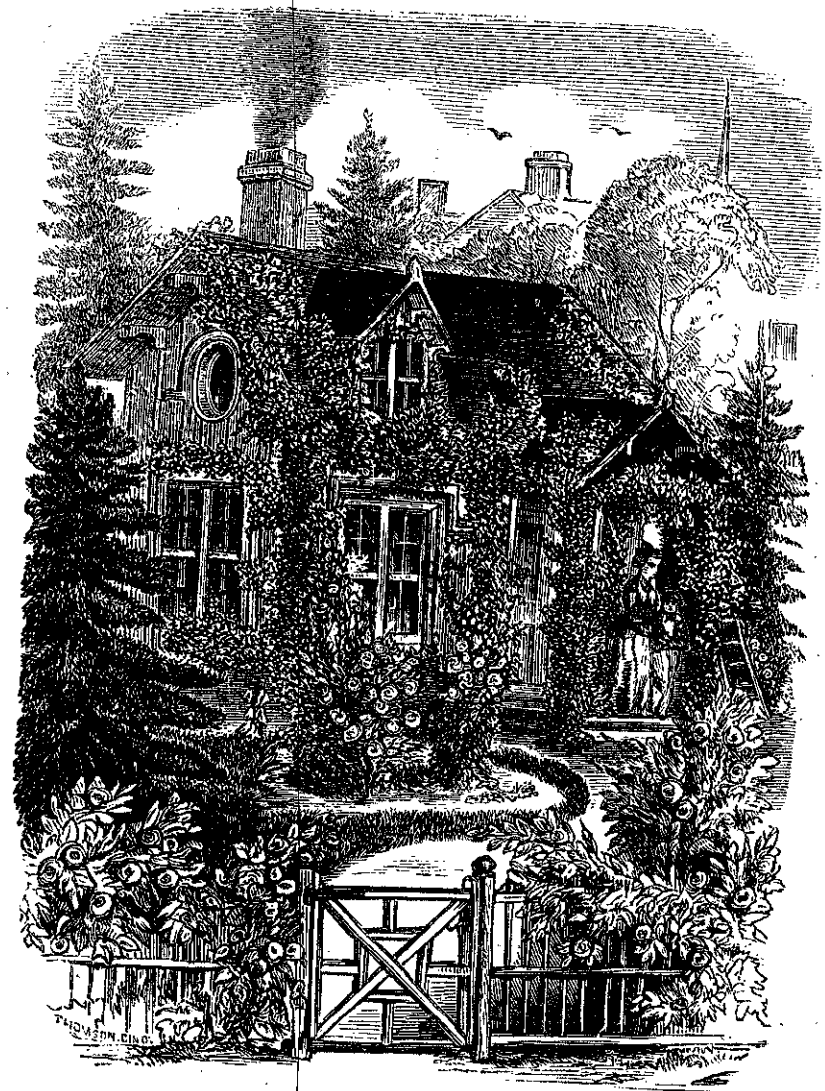
"I think," said Flora, "we must have a Christmas dinner, Chris. What do you say to asking Uncle Silas to come and dine with us? I pity the poor man, without a friend in all the world."

Now, Chris would himself as soon have thought of asking a bear, or a buffalo, to dine with them, as Silas Bowen. Nevertheless, he would do any thing his wife proposed; and so he answered, merrily:

"Of course we must. And, if you wish it, I will call around and ask him. But you need not count upon his coming, or boil an extra tuber on his account."

"Nothing like trying," said Flora, as she set the breakfast on the table. "Give him my compliments, and say I bid him come for papa's sake."

Crooked Christy was almost wild with pleasure at the idea of a Christmas-dinner. For though he had never had the satisfaction of partaking of such a repast in all his life, he was not



IVY COTTAGE.

slow in conjuring up, in his imagination, what it would be like. And whether or no the picture that he formed of it was like the thing itself, was of little consequence. It was to be a grand affair, and he could scarce restrain himself for his delight. For some time he had apparently been slowly outgrowing his terrible affliction, and Flora had rejoiced in what she thought was evidence that he would finally overcome it altogether. Now, whether it was the excitement of the occasion, or the recurrence of the Christmas-tide—when he always seemed to be worse than common—she could not tell; but the old disorder seemed to break out afresh, and more violently than ever. And he reeled and danced about like a lunatic, upset the chairs and came near throwing down the dishes which Flora was washing; laughed, whooped, and tore around as if he was possessed by the untamed spirit of a Kickapoo.

Flora's heart sunk within her at this fresh outbreak of the dreadful malady, and she sat down and wept most bitterly. Her grief, however, had no effect upon Crooked Christy, who went on throwing over every thing he could by any means upset; tossing all sorts of articles about the room, and, finally, succeeded in shattering a small mirror that hung over the mantle.

The rest of the day was necessarily devoted to quieting the boy, and toward evening the paroxysm seemed to have somewhat subsided.

Doctor Slater was called, who proposed to give him some brandy, as the only remedy that he thought likely to afford him any relief. But to this Flora most positively objected, and he took his leave, considerably offended that his professional advice had been rejected.

But we must not forget that Chris was sent to give old Silas Bowen an invitation to dinner.

Chris was not the man to draw back from any thing he had undertaken. But now, as he ascended the stairs leading to Silas Bowen's room, he felt as if he would rather have walked into Daniel's den of lions. He had put it off until toward evening, and now the passage leading to the room was almost wholly dark; still he could hear his uncle's voice at the other end, and it did not tend in the least to reassure him.

Approaching the door, however, he rapped on it gently, and the bear growled:

"Come in."

"Good evening, uncle," said Chris, as he opened the door.

"How do you do?"

The man raised his hard face, and lifted his long gray eyebrows a little, and replied:

"Why, good evening, you vagabond; and why do you call me uncle? The Lord knows, I'm no relation of yours."

Chris was about to turn around and walk away; but, remembering that that would not be delivering Flora's message, he stopped and answered:

"Flora bade me give you her compliments, and request you to have the kindness to come and dine with us to-morrow."

"The deuce she did! And does she think I can't buy a dinner of my own, without coming to dine with paupers?" he added, with a sneer.

"My wife is not a pauper, I'd have you understand. And if you dare to say a word against her, I'll knock you down," said Chris, in rising wrath.

"Humph! how long since?" said Silas.

"I regret to say it is not quite as long as I could wish. But I prefer not to discuss that matter, if you please," he answered, ashamed that he had already shown so much passion.

"You can't come it, young man," said Silas, looking as wise as an owl and as sweet as a hyena. "I'm too old to be taken in by such chaff as that. I know your game. You can't get a cent of my money. And, as to dinners, I have enough of my own." So saying, he looked

away contemptuously, while Chris, with an almost irrepressible desire to throw him out of the window into the river, bit his lips savagely, turned on his heel, and left the room.

"It is just as I expected," said Chris, as he related to Flora his interview with Silas Bowen. "The old brute will not leave his den."

"Never mind," said Flora, "we will cook our dinner just the same. Somebody may come in to help us eat it."



XI.

Breaking the Ice.

THE last echo of Chris's footsteps had scarcely died away upon the stairs, and Silas Bowen was muttering to himself about the hungry curs who brayed upon his heels, when another light tap at his door startled him. Whoever it could be, had crept up softly, as not a footfall had announced the coming. But Silas growled, as usual:

"Come in!"

Then the door was opened slowly, and a very red head of shaggy hair and a pair of squinting gray eyes were thrust in cautiously, as if the owner had contemplated beating a hasty retreat, if the animal should prove too savage to encounter.

"Get out of here, you little, sneaking imp!" said Silas. "I know your kind too well already. Leave, I tell you, or I'll wring your neck!"

But Susan mistook the man for a barking dog only; and she was used to them. And so, without paying any heed to Silas Bowen's threatening words, she advanced still farther into the room, and began to say:

"If you please, sir, Mrs. Raymond sent me to see if you'd be so kind as to lend her a little money. She ain't had nothin' to eat for two days, sir; and Mr. Raymond, he's drunk the whole time, sir."

"Get out!" thundered Silas, who was in no mood to listen to any thing about Mrs. Raymond, and, least of all, to such an appeal as that. And he sprang up, and made a dash at the girl.

She, therefore, instantly abandoned her long-cherished plan of squeezing a little money out of the old skinflint, as she called him—a plan which had been talked over and duly considered by a solemn conclave of the begging clan to which she had attached herself, and over which no little pains had been spent in her preparation—and turned and fled wildly down the stairs. Now, it so happened that there were both front and back stairs to Silas Bowen's office, the latter leading out upon the wharf. And as these were nearest, she naturally took down them, in the haste of her retreat; and ran out blindly, and jumped, as she supposed, into the

street. The river was coated over at the time with a thin crust of ice. And there was a crash, and a splash, and a very much surprised party floundering about in the cold water, and shrieking most heart-rendingly for help.

Silas Bowen rarely ever laughed; but now he stood upon the wharf, and laughed until he cried; while she besought him most piteously to lift her out. Finally, he reached down and drew her out of the chilling water. But Susan was already so benumbed that she could scarcely walk, and would certainly have frozen to death if not now sheltered from the cold. It may have been the laugh that he had had, or her woeful appearance, as he fished her out of the water, with her teeth rattling like a box of marbles, which awakened a real sense of pity for the girl; at least, he said to her kindly:

"You must come back now, and get warm, and take a fresh start. Navigation has closed for this year," he added; and then he shook his sides again with a prolonged laugh, such as he had not experienced for many a year.

Susan's cold bath had quite taken the conceit out of her. And when Silas began to question her a little, stopping every few minutes to indulge in another hearty laugh, she told him all the truth about herself, and all she knew about

the Raymonds. And, warming with her subject, she grew quite tender as she related all of poor Flora's misery and noble self-denial; and very pitiful, as she went on to tell of Crooked Christy, and how his mother's heart was grieved because of him; and fairly eloquent, as she described Chris's reformation, and the struggle he was making now to earn an honest living.

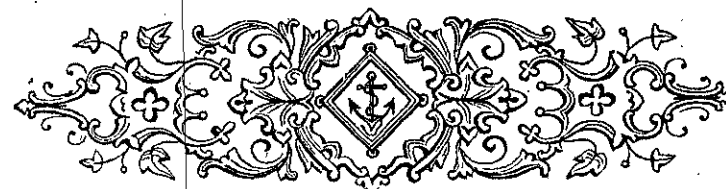
When once the emotional nature of a person is aroused, we all know how very easy it becomes to glide from one expression of it to another. And so, from laughing at poor Susan's reckless plunge, Silas soon found his eyes begin to fill with tears, as he listened to the simple recital of his poor niece's sufferings; and he fairly sat spell-bound, as she depicted the final grand resolve with which Chris broke away at last from the demon that had bound him.

After Susan had taken her departure, Silas Bowen sat for a long while by his fire in his office, wrapped in silent meditation. He was suddenly awakened to a new experience, and visions of the days long past came crowding back upon him, out of the dim shadows of the by-gone years. Once more he seemed to sit before the old wide fire-place, with its blazing hickory-logs forever snapping out the red coals on the carpet; while, with his brother George, he puz-

zled over the problems that vexed his youthful brain. And now he called to mind how George had always helped him over the rough places, being a little older, and having mastered all the difficulties which seemed so insurmountable. Then, the well-remembered face of his dear old mother, as she used to sit there, darning stockings, came before him. And how she used to tuck her boys in bed, giving them each a good-night-kiss; and knew no difference in the pure mother-love with which she held them both close to her heart. The rambles in the field; the nuts they gathered; climbing the trees in search of bird's-nests, those glorious trophies which boys will risk their necks to gather, in spite of all remonstrance; the hunting and the fishing that they did together, from the time that he was only large enough to walk behind his older brother, and bag the game, until he could be trusted with the gun himself; and how George fished him out of the river once, when he had stumbled and fallen in,—all these scenes passed before him in clear panorama, mingled with the scent of wild-flowers, and the rustle of the Autumn leaves; while he looked out from the little window in his chamber, as if the landscape lay before his sight—on the winding river, the broad meadow, and the rolling hills he had

so dearly loved. And, drawing an old bandanna from his pocket, he wiped his face, as if ashamed of the tears that were chasing each other down his furrowed cheeks.

"I will," he muttered to himself, at last; "and it shall be no half-way demonstration, either; but one to make the people rub their eyes with wonder." So saying, he closed his desk, drew on his overcoat, and locked his dusty office; then groped his way out through the gloomy passage to the street.



XII.

A Christmas Eve.



T may have been unnoticed by most persons how all the good that may be purposed by one individual agrees or harmonizes with all good intentions, by whomsoever planned. If you have never thought of this, kind reader, just take an observation, as you pass along, and see if the statement is not generally confirmed. It needs not, then, be such a matter of surprise, that any two or more should, unexpectedly, find themselves engaged in forwarding the happiness and comfort of the same particular subjects. But it was, nevertheless, a genuine surprise to Mrs. Matthew, when her servant ushered Mr. Silas Bowen into her library on this same Christmas eve.

They knew each other at a glance, although no word had passed between them for a score

of years. But the reputation of both was notorious—the one, for her Christ-like deeds of charity and love; the other, for his hard, cold nature, which had bid defiance to all human sympathy. And hereby hangs a tale, one scarcely can refrain from telling; although it must be summed up in a word—a “condensed novel”—if the reader please.

The man and woman who stood looking into each other's eyes had known each other once, and-known to love. But Silas Bowen was a wine-drinker, and Mrs. Matthew had always a strong horror of a drunkard. She had said to him:

“Will you give this up for me?”

“Can you not trust me?” Silas answered.

“I can't trust any man with my life's happiness who is a slave to wine, or one who values it above my love,” said Mrs. Matthew—*née* Miss Jennie Stewart. Silas was proud: thought her demand unjust, and that it argued such a lack of faith in him, that no man of spirit would submit to it. Besides, he had no doubt she would relent, and so he faltered and refused to answer.

That hesitation was the fatal rock on which he wrecked his hopes; and, at last, he turned away from one he truly loved, with untold bitterness.

Miss Steward married Mr. Matthew, and enjoyed for several years a home of undisturbed serenity and quiet happiness. But Silas Bowen closed his heart against the gentler influences of life, and nursed his early disappointment. She had been a widow for two years, however; that is all. And now they stood once more face to face, after the lapse of years, when time had wrought its changes with them; sprinkling the locks of one with silver threads, and leaving on the other's face full many a trace of conflict.

“You are surprised to see me, Mrs. Matthew,” the man began, “but certainly not more astonished than I am at myself for being here. I could not have imagined, two hours ago, that such a meeting as this would ever have occurred. Now I am here to make a very short but full confession, and to ask your wise assistance in a little matter about which you can render me efficient service.”

“Proceed, sir,” said Mrs. Matthew, doubting very much whereunto this would grow.

“My whole life has been a grand mistake,” said Silas, and his voice trembled so that he could scarcely speak. “You were wholly right; I was wholly wrong, and I have suffered for it.”

“Pardon me,” said Mrs. Matthew, “but this is quite uncalled-for. You owe me no apology.”

"Nevertheless, allow me to go on," said Silas. "I was about to add, that I have just this night awakened to the fact, that all the spite which I have for these years been striving to inflict upon the world, I have only been imposing on myself. All at once the burden has grown too heavy for me, and I am resolved to cast it down."

"Really, Mr. Bowen," said Mrs. Matthew, very nervously, "I can't allow you to go on in this fashion." But still she waited anxiously for him to proceed. Mr. Silas Bowen noticed it, and a smile broke over his hard features:

"I see," he said, "that you are still suspicious of me. I assure you there is now no cause to take alarm. You will grant my request, I know."

"Indeed," said Mrs. Matthew, "that is quite an assumption. But what is it?"

"I wish to make my niece a Christmas present, and to give them all a dinner, on to-morrow, worthy of the day."

"Is that all?" said the lady; and she sat down in her low rocking-chair, and fanned herself vigorously. "Please be seated, Mr. Bowen. I'm quite unfit for any thing of late, my nerves are so distracted; but I shall be glad to assist you; and as to the dinner, I'm a little beforehand about that, as I am intending to invite them over to dine with me."

"But you see," said Mr. Bowen, "that I have a plan of my own."

And then he went on to explain his purpose; and when he finished, Mrs. Matthew said:

"O, that is grand and noble! We will have it as you like, by all means!"

"But we want a little select company," said Silas, "to make them feel at home."

"I have invited a few that Flora used to know. They will all be delighted to take part in such a feast."

"But Chris and Flora and that little fellow of theirs—"

"Crooked Christy," suggested Mrs. Matthew.

"They will need some clothes, perhaps," said Silas.

"Fortunately I have attended to that also, and the garments will be sent over in the morning."

"Then the rest of the arrangement I wish to commit wholly to you; only you must draw upon me for the entire expense."

"But you will be at the feast?"

"Chris came to-night, and invited me to dine with them to-morrow; and I will come, but only as a guest," said Silas.

"O, I see; very well. Good evening, Mr. Bowen. Every thing shall be in readiness at three o'clock."

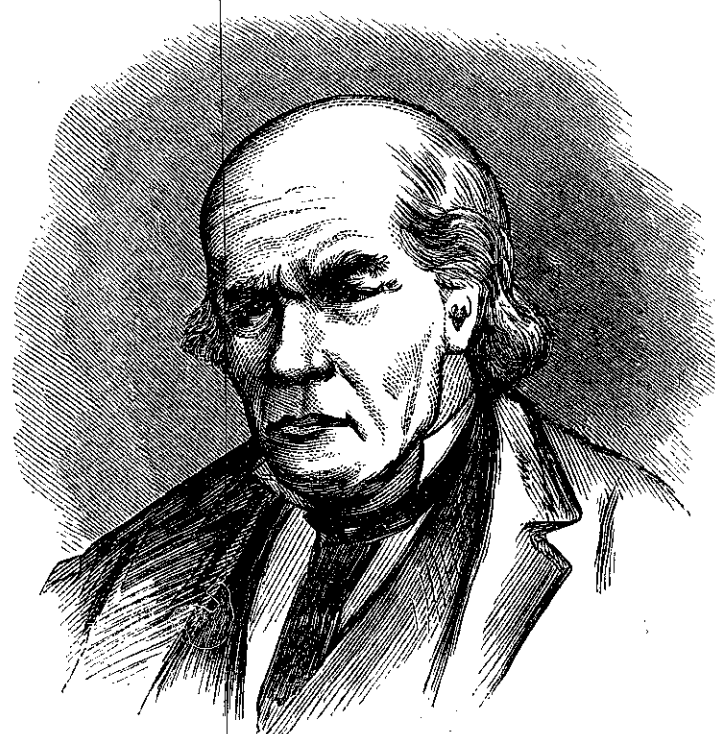


XIII.

A Merry Christmas.

SOME things are indescribable. The doings of this Christmas-day belong, by right, among them. Why need we, then, attempt the unattainable, or filch from the imagination that which should be left to it entirely? But the reader will hardly close this little history with satisfaction, unless we add a few light touches to the picture, which has grown so precious in our hands as to make us very careful about adding a new color, and only anxious to complete our original design.

"A merry Christmas!" said Chris, as Flora opened her eyes late on the following morning; for she had worked hard the night before, preparing for to-morrow's dinner. Chris had been up for a half hour, and kindled the fires and swept away the snow from the front path, and now came in with the broom in one hand and a sealed note in the other.



SILAS BOWEN.

"Here's a note for you, my lady. Stay, I'm mistaken; it's for Mr. and Mrs. Raymond. Shall I open it?"

"Certainly," said Flora, rubbing her eyes; "but how did it come this early?"

"Early?" said Chris; "it's eight o'clock. But, however, a boy brought it." And so saying, he tore open the envelope and read:

"C——, December 25, 18—.

"Mrs. Matthew's compliments to Mr. and Mrs. Raymond, and requests their company to dinner, to-day, at three o'clock."

H. MATTHEW."

"There," said Chris, "how about your dinner now? Will you go? The boy is waiting."

"We must," said Flora, "return our thanks, and say that we accept her invitation."

A couple of hours later a wagon drew up before the door of Ivy Cottage, and a man sprang out and asked, as Chris went to the door:

"Does Mr. Chris Raymond live here?"

"Yes," said Mr. Raymond.

"Then, perhaps, you'll lend a hand to take in these parcels," said the stranger, evidently in a hurry, and not at all inclined to be communicative. And he proceeded to hand out sundry bundles, all marked "Chris Raymond," or "Flora," and "A Merry Christmas."

There could be no mistake about it; but neither Chris nor Flora could comprehend what it meant; and as soon as the bundles were unloaded, the man jumped into his wagon and drove away.

We need not stay to listen to the exclamations of surprise that Chris and Flora uttered, as they proceeded to examine the parcels that had been sent them; or delay to relate how Crooked Christy grew more boisterous, when his small packet, being opened, disclosed a velvet suit, with bright gilt buttons; nor stop to wonder, along with Chris, who it could be that had sent him a brand-new suit of clothes, from head to foot. And it would be a shame to notice Flora's tears, as she unfolded a beautiful silk dress, which she recognized at once; and a set of furs, that had been hers six years ago; and, last of all, a diamond ring—her wedding-ring—the very one Chris slipped upon her finger on that Christmas morning, when they stood before the altar in Christ's Church. And now she held it up toward the light—and the jewel never seemed to sparkle half so brilliantly before—then kissed it.

"Put it on my finger, Chris," she said.

And he did so; and again the chimes rang out, and every brazen tongue pealed forth a note of praise.

"Listen," said Flora; "they are rejoicing over our new wedding."

"Ah," said Chris, "it makes all the difference in the world how you feel yourself, whether you like their music. I have never heard them ring but once before, since our wedding-day, when they did not sound positively horrid to me; but last Christmas morning, and to-day, they ring like bells of joy."

And so they were; and so is every voice of nature one of gladness. And every rock and hill or winding river; high-waving tree or tiny flower; clear, starlit sky, or cloud, wild-driven by the wintry wind, speaks to the soul of him who can receive it, of the eternal beauty and unfathomed love of God. Pity the man who, on a Christmas-day, can not conceive or realize the grace that sent a God to bear the guilt of men, and lift from their low wretchedness the race he loves to their inheritance as sons, heirs of the Highest, and joint-heirs with Christ.

Crooked Christy thought it never would, but three o'clock came round at last, and they stood before the door on High Street, where they were to dine.

Mrs. Matthew welcomed them with smiling countenance, remarking:

"You are very prompt, I see; not a moment

too soon, nor yet a second late; but all my other guests are here before you. But walk into the parlor. There, wait a moment." And she disappeared.

"This is queer," said Flora; "why does she send us here before we lay aside our wrappings?"

But Mrs. Matthew soon returned, and said:

"I did not ask you to take off your things, because I wish you to walk over to your old home and take a look at it. I have the key, and can show it to you. It has passed into new hands recently, and been put in most charming order. I know you'll be delighted."

"Is it occupied?" said Flora.

"Well, no; not hardly that, just now, but is to be, I think, by an old friend of yours; but the name, let me see, the name. It is queer; have I forgotten it?"

"Indeed," said Flora; "who, I should like to know? I hope I shall not be too much tempted to break the Tenth Commandment, or I fear that it will make me miserable to visit the dear old place again."

"Never fear for that," said Mrs. Matthew, "but come on;" and she led the way which they already knew so well. Arrived at the front door, they noticed that a paper was fastened over the plate.

"I wonder what this is for?" said Chris.

"Perhaps it is put there to keep the silver from becoming tarnished," said Mrs. Matthew.

"O, very likely; I did not think of that. But I would so much like to pull it off, just to see who it may be that's coming in here," Chris replied.

"O, do," said Flora.

"You'd better not," said Mrs. Matthew. "This is taking a sort of liberty, at best, you know; and I think I'll remember the name soon. It's quite familiar."

But just then Mrs. Matthew had unlocked the door, and they walked into the hall; then into the parlor, which was newly furnished; then into the library, where Chris broke out:

"Why, this is almost exactly as I left it six years ago. A few books have been added—and see—here is a full line of temperance works. It might have been better, for me, if they had been here sooner."

"That, at least, shows the good sense of the gentleman who is coming. If he has children, it may do them a world of good. Many people neglect such literature altogether, if they do not absolutely despise it. Perhaps, because it is a constant rebuke to their drinking habits, which they can't endure."

"I never thought of that before," said Chris; "but I believe it must be true."

And so they passed on, with a word of admiration for every thing they saw, and went up-stairs, and to the old apartments where Flora had so often sat; and then into the room where Crooked Christy first saw the light, and his mother told him of it, and could not here repress her tears as the old scene came back upon her; while Chris put his arm about her, with a gentle silence that spoke directly to her heart, with so much better language than poor, inexpressive words.

At last Mrs. Matthew suggested:

"Suppose we lay off our things here, and stay awhile. I see the house is warm." And then, as if a bright idea had just occurred to her, she added: "How would you like to eat your dinner here, and entertain the guests yourselves? I'll take all the responsibility," she said, as she saw that Flora was about to object—"I'll have it brought right over," she added, looking at her watch. "Do n't say another word, but sit down here. I'll be back presently;" and away she flew in a second.

"What kind of a kettle of fish is this?" said Chris. "This is carrying it a grain too far. But what under heaven can we do?"

"Let her have her way," said Flora. "What

Mrs. Matthew does is all right any way, with every one. If any one else should do so, it would cause a scandal."

"Well, may be so; but now I'll warrant this whole thing is planned, so let us go ahead and do it grandly. But, for all that, I shall feel very foolish, pretending to entertain a company when I can scarcely feed my wife and child."

"Hush, Chris, you can do that now; you know you can. But this is perfectly ridiculous, I must confess."

Why need we dwell upon it, or attempt to describe what followed—how a troop of waiters came in, and brought the dinner out of the kitchen, which had been prudently avoided; how Mr. and Mrs. Raymond were marshaled into the parlor to receive their guests, who now began to arrive; and how, last of all, came Mr. Silas Bowen, presenting his most humble compliments, and saying that he had repented and concluded to accept their hospitality; and how Chris and Flora were almost stupefied with amazement at his appearance, and could scarcely believe their eyes, and failed altogether to do the thing up grandly, as they had expected, but broke down utterly, and made a very pitiful appearance?

"O, come, come," said Mrs. Matthew, "this won't do."

And dinner was announced immediately.

We might linger over this part of our story as long as it took to dispatch that famous dinner. But we forbear. No one would ever feel a sense of satisfaction in sitting down to any ordinary table, after having read a full account of this.

But all things have an end, and finally the long repast was finished. And at last the guests began to bid their hosts adieu, and reluctantly retire. Old Silas Bowen was the last to go, as he had been the merriest of all, and kept the table in an uproar with his odd performances. And every one declared he was the funniest man alive.

Now, as he stood beside the door to say good-night, his voice appeared a little husky ; but just then Mrs. Matthew said :

"Why, who has torn the paper from this plate, I wonder ? I must put it back."

During all the excitement, it had wholly been forgotten ; but at her words both Chris and Flora stooped to read the name upon it, and started up surprised as they saw cut in plainest characters :

"CHRISTOPHER RAYMOND."

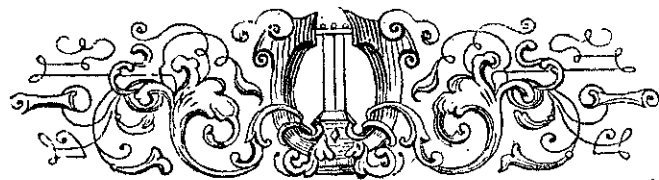
"What can that mean ?" said Chris.

"It means," said Silas Bowen, "that this is now your home. Good-night, my dears ; may Heaven bless you !" and before they could utter another

word, he had gone out and passed into the street.

We might say they were dumfounded. We might say almost any thing you please, and then fail to express the half. As we said at the beginning of this chapter, some things are indescribable. So, let it pass.





XIV.

Home at Last.

A FEW more words, and we shall turn away from this scene altogether. Not without keen regrets, but of necessity; as we would gladly follow those whom we have learned to love, share farther in their joys, or help them bear their sorrows. But the voice of duty ever calls us forward, and we must soon part company with these familiar faces. Still, on the great high-road of life, we trust to meet with others, and learn to love them also, as well as, or better than, the chance travelers with whom we have been journeying.

Chris, Flora, and Crooked Christy slept that night in their old home alone. They slept well, when they did sleep, which was far along toward the morning hours. The excitement of the day had been too much for Crooked Christy.

Although he did not break out into any very demonstrative exhibition of his peculiar ailment, he was clearly overdone and very restless. And when at last they slept, tired nature claimed its due; and they did not waken until very late the following morning.

They might not have aroused so early as it was; but that the door-bell rang, once and again, and broke their slumbers. Then Chris went to the window and looked out, and said:

"Who's there?" And a piping voice replied: "It's me!"

"O, ah, it is, is it?" Chris replied. "Well, who is 'me?'"

"Why, don't you know me?" said the girl; for it was a girl, turning her face up to the window, with the old squinting eyes.

"Susan; O, is that 'me?' What does 'me' want this early in the morning?"

The girl giggled, like water running out of a bottle, as she answered:

"I come to see if you wanted a girl."

"You can wait until we get up for an answer, can't you?"

"O, yes; only it's mighty cold down here."

"Is it? Well, I'll let you in." And he slipped down, and turned the key for her to enter.

"How about this?" said Chris, as he returned.

"We must take her," said Flora; and that was the end of it.

Mr. Silas Bowen did not limit his benevolence to the single magnificent gift of a well-appointed house. That alone, in the present condition of his relatives, might have been a very large elephant—difficult to keep. He took Chris into partnership with him in his business, and patiently taught him the true principles of success. And, from that moment, his future was assured.

We wish we could add, for the sake of rhythm, that Silas Bowen and Mrs. Matthew, finally, enjoyed together a few rich Autumn years. But, desirable as such a consummation might appear, the truth compels us to admit the fact that such was not the case. Silas made his home with the young people, and enjoyed it so much better than he had his former life, that he was fully satisfied. And Mrs. Matthew held the remembrance of her husband too close to her warm heart, ever to wish for one to fill his place.

Mrs. Hasty's services were subsequently demanded, upon two occasions—and two happy, black-eyed girls added their charms to the regenerated home.

"But what became of Crooked Christy?"

Ah, we just knew that you would ask that

question; and, although it almost breaks our heart, it must be answered. We have already spoken of the fact, that the excitement on that Christmas-day was too much for him. He never rallied from it, but forthwith began to droop and waste away. There was no apparent disease, but a gradual wearing out of his nervous energy, as might naturally be expected of one who was constantly and unnaturally stimulated.

Flora watched his failing health with the anxiety of despair; for now, when all other sorrows were removed, she felt only the greater affection and deeper grief for him. She saw him daily drifting away from her, to wander with his crooked steps through that mysterious and vast unknown; and, as it seemed to her, with no gentle hand to guide and no heart like hers to pity and love him still unfalteringly.

How weak we are; how blind to the unchanging love that follows us! Poor Flora! Look up and see the Lamb of God, with his extended arms, ready to take thy darling! But her eyes were fixed upon the little speck of clay, on which there rested the deep curse of God. He would teach her to look higher. And so he took away the cloud from Crooked Christy's brain, and loosed his tongue; and the light of heaven for the first time shone in his clear eyes; but he

laid him on a bed of suffering. And there, for many weary weeks and months, the o'erfond mother hung above him, clinging to her idol unrelentingly, until another year had wheeled its circuit round. Without, the snow lay heavily upon the ground; within, the wasted form of Crooked Christy—no longer crooked—lay, weak and helpless, on his little bed. It was Christmas eve. Beside him sat his father, with his head buried in his hands; and the tears, that he did not seek to hide, raining fast through his fingers and down his cheeks.

Flora sat on the bedside, holding one little, frail, thin hand in hers, and chafing it. Already it began to feel the chill of death. But the boy's eyes beamed with a clear, still light as he said:

"There won't be any body crooked up in heaven, will there, mamma?"

"No, my darling," she replied.

"Nor any one to call me Crooked Christy, either, will there?"

"O, no, dear," Flora answered, comprehending, for the first time, what *he* would escape.

"And the Lord Jesus will love me just as well as if I hadn't always been Crooked Christy, won't he, mamma?"

"Just as well, my child," and her heart also

took in that simple truth, which she spoke for the comfort of her dying boy.

"Then I must go," he said; "for I see the angels waiting for me, and they want to take me to the shining city before the Christmas-tide; when they all touch their golden harps and sing the loud hosannah, 'Glory to God in the highest, on earth peace, good-will to men.'"

The little cuckoo fluttered on its perch, and came out, bright as ever, to sing its welcome-song, once more, to the gladdest of all days. And, with its last shrill chirp, there fell upon the waiting ears of the sad watchers, the clear, metallic music of the Christmas-chimes. And borne aloft upon that wave of sound, which wafted to the throne our feeble praise, the sweet soul took its flight. Then the stricken parents knelt beside that bed of suffering, over which there hung a halo of this glorious triumph, and gave thanks to God.

The poor, bound soul was freed forever from that staggering body, and ready, with its mission fully ended, to be transferred to that far happier country, where every one is fair; "where "God shall wipe away all tears from their eyes, and there shall be no more death, neither sorrow nor crying: . . . for the former things are passed away."

And while we write these words the air is full of the rich "treasures of the snow," descending slowly in its zigzag lines, and falling gently on his little grave—nature's bright emblem of the pure robes of heaven; as earth, air, sea, and sky proclaim the glory of our Father's house.

