

EXTRA NUMBER FOR CHRISTMAS  
OF  
HOUSEHOLD WORDS.

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WHAT CHRISTMAS IS, AS WE  
GROW OLDER.

TIME was, with most of us, when Christmas Day encircling all our limited world like a magic ring, left nothing out for us to miss or seek; bound together all our home enjoyments, affections, and hopes; grouped every thing and every one around the Christmas fire; and made the little picture shining in our bright young eyes, complete.

Time came, perhaps, all so soon! when our thoughts overleaped that narrow boundary; when there was some one (very dear, we thought then, very beautiful, and absolutely perfect) wanting to the fulness of our happiness; when we were wanting too (or we thought so, which did just as well) at the Christmas hearth by which that some one sat; and when we intertwined with every wreath and garland of our life that some one's name.

That was the time for the bright visionary Christmases which have long arisen from us to shew faintly, after summer rain, in the palest edges of the rainbow! That was the time for the beatified enjoyment of the things that were to be, and never were, and yet the things that were so real in our resolute hope that it would be hard to say, now, what realities achieved since, have been stronger!

What! Did that Christmas never really come when we and the priceless pearl who was our young choice were received, after the happiest of totally impossible marriages, by the two united families previously at daggers-drawn on our account? When brothers and sisters in law who had always been rather cool to us before our relationship was effected, perfectly doted on us, and when fathers and mothers overwhelmed us with unlimited incomes? Was that Christmas dinner never really eaten, after which we arose, and generously and eloquently rendered honor to our late rival, present in the company, then and there exchanging friendship and forgiveness, and founding an attachment, not to be surpassed in Greek or Roman story, which subsisted until death? Has that same

rival long ceased to care for that same priceless pearl, and married for money, and become usurious? Above all, do we really know, now, that we should probably have been miserable if we had won and worn the pearl, and that we are better without her?

That Christmas when we had recently achieved so much fame; when we had been carried in triumph somewhere, for doing something great and good; when we had won an honored and ennobled name, and arrived and were received at home in a shower of tears of joy; is it possible that that Christmas has not come yet?

And is our life here, at the best, so constituted that, pausing as we advance at such a noticeable mile-stone in the track as this great birthday, we look back on the things that never were, as naturally and full as gravely as on the things that have been and are gone, or have been and still are? If it be so, and so it seems to be, must we come to the conclusion, that life is little better than a dream, and little worth the loves and strivings that we crowd into it?

No! Far be such miscalled philosophy from us, dear Reader, on Christmas Day! Nearer and closer to our hearts be the Christmas spirit, which is the spirit of active usefulness, perseverance, cheerful discharge of duty, kindness, and forbearance! It is in the last virtues especially, that we are, or should be, strengthened by the unaccomplished visions of our youth; for, who shall say that they are not our teachers to deal gently even with the impalpable nothings of the earth!

Therefore, as we grow older, let us be more thankful that the circle of our Christmas associations and of the lessons that they bring, expands! Let us welcome every one of them, and summon them to take their places by the Christmas hearth.

Welcome, old aspirations, glittering creatures of an ardent fancy, to your shelter underneath the holly! We know you, and have not outlived you yet. Welcome, old projects and old loves, however fleeting, to your

nooks among the steadier lights that burn around us. Welcome, all that was ever real to our hearts; and for the earnestness that made you real, thanks to Heaven! Do we build no Christmas castles in the clouds now? Let our thoughts, fluttering like butterflies among these flowers of children, bear witness! Before this boy, there stretches out a Future, brighter than we ever looked on in our old romantic time, but bright with honor and with truth. Around this little head on which the sunny curls lie heaped, the graces sport, as prettily, as airily, as when there was no scythe within the reach of Time to shear away the curls of our first-love. Upon another girl's face near it—placider but smiling bright—a quiet and contented little face, we see Home fairly written. Shining from the word, as rays shine from a star, we see how, when our graves are old, other hopes than ours are young, other hearts than ours are moved; how other ways are smoothed; how other happiness blooms, ripens, and decays—no, not decays, for other homes and other bands of children, not yet in being nor for ages yet to be, arise, and bloom and ripen to the end of all!

Welcome, everything! Welcome, alike what has been, and what never was, and what we hope may be, to your shelter underneath the holly, to your places round the Christmas fire, where what is sits open-hearted! In yonder shadow, do we see obtruding furtively upon the blaze, an enemy's face? By Christmas Day we do forgive him! If the injury he has done us may admit of such companionship, let him come here and take his place. If otherwise, unhappily, let him go hence, assured that we will never injure nor accuse him.

On this day, we shut out Nothing!

"Pause," says a low voice. "Nothing? Think!"

"On Christmas Day, we will shut out from our fireside, Nothing."

"Not the shadow of a vast City where the withered leaves are lying deep?" the voice replies. "Not the shadow that darkens the whole globe? Not the shadow of the City of the Dead?"

Not even that. Of all days in the year, we will turn our faces towards that City upon Christmas Day, and from its silent hosts bring those we loved, among us. City of the Dead, in the blessed name wherein we are gathered together at this time, and in the Presence that is here among us according to the promise, we will receive, and not dismiss, thy people who are dear to us!

Yes. We can look upon these children angels that alight, so solemnly, so beautifully, among the living children by the fire, and can bear to think how they departed from us. Entertaining angels unawares, as the Patriarchs did, the playful children are unconscious of their guests; but we can see them—can see a radiant arm around one favorite neck, as if there were a tempting of that child away. Among the celestial figures there is

one, a poor mis-shapen boy on earth, of a glorious beauty now, of whom his dying mother said it grieved her much to leave him here, alone, for so many years as it was likely would elapse before he came to her—being such a little child. But he went quickly, and was laid upon her breast, and in her hand she leads him.

There was a gallant boy, who fell, far away, upon a burning sand beneath a burning sun, and said, "Tell them at home, with my last love, how much I could have wished to kiss them once, but that I died contented and had done my duty!" Or there was another, over whom they read the words, "Therefore we commit his body to the dark!" and so consigned him to the lonely ocean and sailed on. Or there was another who lay down to his rest in the dark shadow of great forests, and, on earth, awoke no more. O shall they not, from sand and sea and forest, be brought home at such a time!

There was a dear girl—almost a woman—never to be one—who made a mourning Christmas in a house of joy, and went her trackless way to the silent City. Do we recollect her, worn out, faintly whispering what could not be heard, and falling into that last sleep for weariness? O look upon her now! O look upon her beauty, her serenity, her changeless youth, her happiness! The daughter of Jairus was recalled to life, to die; but she, more blest, has heard the same voice, saying unto her, "Arise for ever!"

We had a friend who was our friend from early days, with whom we often pictured the changes that were to come upon our lives, and merrily imagined how we would speak, and walk, and think, and talk, when we came to be old. His destined habitation in the City of the Dead received him in his prime. Shall he be shut out from our Christmas remembrance? Would his love have so excluded us? Lost friend, lost child, lost parent, sister, brother, husband, wife, we will not so discard you! You shall hold your cherished places in our Christmas hearts, and by our Christmas fires; and in the season of immortal hope, and on the birthday of immortal mercy, we will shut out Nothing!

The winter sun goes down over town and village; on the sea it makes a rosy path, as if the Sacred tread were fresh upon the water. A few more moments, and it sinks, and night comes on, and lights begin to sparkle in the prospect. On the hill-side beyond the shapelessly-diffused town, and in the quiet keeping of the trees that gird the village-steeple, remembrances are cut in stone, planted in common flowers, growing in grass, entwined with lowly brambles around many a mound of earth. In town and village, there are doors and windows closed against the weather, there are flaming logs heaped high, there are joyful faces, there is healthy music of voices. Be all ungentleness and harm excluded from the temples of the Household

Gods, but be those remembrances admitted with tender encouragement! They are of the time and all its comforting and peaceful reassurances; and of the history that reunited even upon earth the living and the dead; and of the broad beneficence and goodness that too many men have tried to tear to narrow shreds.

#### WHAT CHRISTMAS IS TO A BUNCH OF PEOPLE.

THE FATHER OF A FAMILY rubs his hands with a genial smile when Christmas comes; and yet he now and then raises one finger to the calculating "organ" of his cranium with rather a thoughtful air, suggestive of certain bills and taxes, which he is resolved shall not weigh upon his mind. Why should they? He will get through his Christmas bills somehow or other, as he has done before. He has no doubt of being able to muster the money to "article" his eldest son to a highly respectable solicitor; he has already laid up a small portion for his eldest daughter, and makes pretty sure of doing as much for the others by the time they are old enough to be married. He has a good business; his wife is a clever manager; they live happily together; the holly-berries smile at him with the well-remembered sparkle of early days; he therefore determines to enjoy the merry season as of old. What if he *does* see half-a-dozen more grey hairs displaying themselves, as though to remind him that another year has passed, and a certain line or two in his face *does* look a trifle deeper than when he had last observed it? What have such small matters to do with the real age of a man? A man is as old as he feels, and no more. The fact is, the Father of a Family is as young as he was twenty years ago; so he gives his hair an additional and rather flourishing touch with a comb, puts on a new waistcoat, brushes the collar of his coat, and, looking down with complacency on his boots as he sets his hat lightly upon his head, sallies out upon the landing-place, and shouts a jaunty inquiry as to when his wife and daughter will be ready to go to church. The boys are gone on before. Meanwhile he stands thrumming a pleased, but impatient, tattoo with his fingers upon the banisters, and inhaling every now and then a savoury whiff of sweet herbs rising up from the kitchen.

THE MOTHER OF A FAMILY has a world of anxious thoughts about her. She likes Christmas; it is, no doubt, a pleasant time; there are many sweet memories and hopes attending it, and altogether it must be considered as happy: but the butcher's bill, she knows, must be heavy—the baker's too—and as for the grocer's, she is almost afraid to think of it. Besides this, there is a new dress-maker's bill, which she has not yet told Mr. Broadback about. But how was all this to be avoided?

As to herself, she could not do with less, nor her eldest daughter, especially on the eve of her marriage—a happy marriage she most devoutly hopes it will be. Then there are the growing girls, all of whose dresses have got so shockingly short, that she could almost wish the follies of Bloomerism had been softened and translated, and entered England under another character—as a Persian, Turkish, or Polish ladies' "fashions," just imported from Paris—so that something economically elegant might have gradually been introduced, inch by inch, as it were, to the great saving of the Mothers of large families of daughters. As for the bonnet-maker, she *must* wait. It is unknown what sums have been paid that bonnet-maker in the course of the last six years. Perhaps it would be best not to think any more of these matters just at present. At any rate, Mr. Broadback shall have a good Christmas dinner; she will take care of that; and all their relations and friends who are invited shall be made as happy as possible.

THE ELDEST SON has a mixed feeling about Christmas. He has no very romantic impressions of the study of the Law; but he wishes to begin life, and to take the first step towards making his way in the world; and as he is to be articulated to Mr. Benjamin Sheepskin early in January, he looks upon the intermediate time rather impatiently. At least he would do so, but that his cousin Ellen is to dine with them on Christmas-day, and stay on a visit for a week afterwards, during which there will be round games and forfeits, and he will "go partners" with his cousin, and dance with her, and show her all his law-books, and decoy her under the mistletoebough; and so he expects to pass a very merry time before he goes to the office of Mr. Sheepskin.

What Christmas is to THE ELDEST DAUGHTER, we may pretty well infer from the increased brightness in her eyes, the frequent blush that suffuses her soft cheeks, the occasional pensive air suddenly awakening up with a smile, the tender sigh, and the additional pains she takes with her beautiful hair, which is never out of order, and yet she thinks it continually needs to be brushed and smoothed, and set to rights. To her, Christmas evidently comes with a wedding-ring concealed in a wreath of evergreen.

Besides the eldest son, there are "THE BOYS;" and these rollicking young chaps are home for the holidays; and Christmas to them is (weather permitting) an endless succession of sliding and snow-balls, and hoops, and going on the ice; and plum-puddings, and mince-pies, and games at blind-man's-buff, and other romps in the evening, with snap-dragon after supper.

TO THE YOUNGEST CHILD—a little bright-eyed fairy of five years old, in a white and sky-blue frock, purple sash, and red shoes—Christmas is a season of romance. It is a whirl of shining hours, in which there are new toys of mysterious beauty, and dances, and kisses, and cakes of all sorts, and sweet-