



ALONE AT CHRISTMASTIME

By S. BARING-GOULD

Is there—can there be—a man more lonely than one returned from a far country, who has been out of his home land for 20 years, and comes back when his parents are dead, his old friends dispersed, and the old nest has passed to other occupants? And can his loneliness be more emphasized than when his return synchronizes with Christmas?

That was my condition when I revisited the mother country. With a beating heart and straining eyes I had looked for the first sight of dear old America after having left it as a lad, hardly a man, some 20 years ago.

I was back—not to home—I had no home now. My heart began to fail me, my spirits decline, when I reached the little country town near which I had been born, and where I had fled the golden hours of childhood. No one knew me. In the churchyard I laid a wreath on the graves where lay dear old father and mother. I looked at our house. It had been rebuilt and was occupied by strangers.



"You Are Very Good."

I went through the village. The little shops had fresh names over them. The old rector who had baptized me was dead. The old school was gone. The ancient church had been renovated. The village inn was in new hands. The old Christmas was no more. No frost, no snow, no icicles; only sludge and a drizzling rain.

I returned from my visit to the village in deep depression. I would haste to the rooms I had taken in a house in the town, and spend my Christmas Eve with my pipe and glass—alone, with not even an old dog to lie at my feet and look up with speaking eyes into my face and sympathize with me in my solitude. I would pass the evening before the fire, looking into the red coals, not building castles among them, but watching the tumbling down of old cottages, old farms, old reminiscences, into ash.

I had done well in the other land, and had returned, not a rich man, but with a competence.

It had been my wish, my ambition, to settle in the village about which

clung all my sweetest and holiest thoughts; to buy there a little land, to tread the old paths, ramble in the same woods, look upon the same scenes, dwell among the same people, re-make a home in the same place. But now—? Could it be?

As I walked back to my lodgings, through the street and by the market place, folk were hurrying in all directions, some with bunches of holly in their hands, a girl or two with a sprig of mistletoe slyly hid in her muff, a man wheeling a Christmas tree on a barrow, butchers' boys carrying joints for the morrow's dinner. Plum puddings and mince pies were displayed in the confectioners' shops. The chemist, the hairdresser, the seedsman, the draper had stuffed their windows with toys, toys, toys. He who had come to earth as a little child had filled every heart with thought of the little ones, and desire to make Christmas a day of joy to them. I had no tiny ones of my own, no little nieces and nephews, no small cousins for whom to provide anything. I was alone—utterly, desolately alone.

As I pursued my way I saw a tall, thin girl walking before me with a basket on her arm, and I noticed that the bottom had come out, and that the contents fell on the pavement. Of this she was unaware. I stooped and picked up a little woolly lamb, then—a something wrapped in paper—then a silver match box breaking out of its covering.

Gathering them together, I ran after the girl and stopped her.

"Excuse me," said I. "Are you a female Hop o' my Thumb, dropping tokens whereby your track may be known?"

I showed her what I had collected. She colored and thanked me. Then I recognized her as the daughter of my landlady.

"You must allow me," said I, "to tie my handkerchief round the basket, and to carry it for you. I believe that we go the same way."

"You are very good," she replied. "We are about to have a Christmas tree for the children this evening, and I have been making some trifling purchases as presents for my brothers and sisters, and for papa and mamma, who must not be forgotten."

"There go the candles!" I exclaimed, as a cataract of red, yellow and green tapers shot out of the basket.

"And there's an orange!" said she, as one of these fruit bounced forth and fell, and rolled away into the gutter.

We were forced to stoop and collect the scattered wax lights, and then to tie my large handkerchief about the basket.

"What a fortunate thing," said I, "that I have got a good sized kerchief in place of one of the miserable little rags that do service nowadays. That is, because I cling to old customs, and when I was a boy my mother always gave me something like a dish-cloth in my pocket."

Then we proceeded on our way, and when we went into the house, she received the basket from me, and again thanked me. "You must not remove the kerchief till all is unpacked," I said, "or there will be another discharge of the contents, and then the children will see what you have provided for them."

"Shall you be dining out to-morrow?" asked the girl.

"—Oh, no! I have none to dine with. I know no one here."

"And this evening. Shall you be going anywhere?"

"—Oh, no! I have nowhere whither to go."

So we parted, and I ascended to my room. I made up the fire, and sat down and reread the newspaper. There was much in it about the approaching feast. I had the illustrated papers. They had issued Christmas supplements, with pictures of happy family gatherings, of Old Father Christmas, of waits and carol singers. I might perhaps hear the waits and singers. I should certainly hear the Christmas bells. That would be all.

I had done with my papers. I sat before the fire in a brown study, and my spirits sank lower and ever lower. I recalled the old Christmases I had spent at home with my parents. I remembered how I had looked into my stockings on the morning to see if Old Father Christmas had visited me in the night and had left there some presents for the Good Boy.

Alas! No Father Christmas would visit me now. All that was of the past—the utterly and irrevocably past.

I did not light my candles. I could read no more. I needed no light for my thoughts, they were too dark to be illumined thus.

As I stood thus musing, I heard a tap at my door, and shouted: "Come in!" There ensued delay, and I called again: "Come in!"

Then the door opened and I saw some little heads outside, with golden curls and flushed cheeks, and a child's voice said: "Please, Mr. What's-your-name, will you come to our tree downstairs?"

"—It—!"

As I hesitated, the child said: "Please—Annie told us to ask you."

And then I saw the tall girl whom I had assisted draw back into the dark behind them.

"Most certainly I will, as you are so kind as to invite me."

So I descended, and there were my landlord and landlady, radiant with happiness, and the five children danced before me and said: "He is come; is it not nice?" Behind, presently, entered Annie, somewhat shyly, and pretending she had come from the kitchen.

I was witness of the delight of the little ones over their presents—the



I Saw the Tall Girl.

woolly lamb, a small cart, a cannon, a doll—the father over a pair of warm stockings of Annie's knitting, the mother over a shawl, also of her work; and I stood smiling and happy, when up sprang one of the children and plucked from the tree the silver match box.

"This," said the child, "is for Mr. What's-his-name. Sister Annie said it was for him."

I was moved more than I can say. So—some had been thinking of me, though I was only a lodger.

"Look here, sir!" said the father, "you're a stranger in the country, and at such a time as this there must be no strangers. You must really sup with us, and dine also with us to-morrow. I can promise you a good dinner, for it is of Annie's making."

All was changed. I was a stranger and they took me in; I was lonely and they made me a friend.

Christmas day, 10:30 p. m.

I returned to my room upstairs, made up the fire, and seated myself before it. I had spent a very pleasant day, and a pleasant evening before that. I did not now feel so discouraged, so hopeless. That was a nice family, very friendly and considerate. And I began to build in the fire. I no longer saw only ruins. I saw, as it were, a pleasant home rise out of the coals, and a pleasing face looked up at me out of them—very much like that of Annie. Ah! If the old home was gone, might I not build one that would be new. I need no longer live in the past, but look to the future, and next Christmas, please God—I would not be alone, that is if Annie—but I cannot say—will consent to put an end to my loneliness and help in building up a future.

Of Interest to Stockholders.
Jasper—I hear that Santa Claus has given up his yearly rounds.
Jumpuppe—You don't tell me!
Jasper—Yes. He has accepted a regular position on the "Salaries Committees" of various big corporations.
—Town Topics.

CHRISTMAS GAMES

FOR YOUNG and OLD



THE BOBBING APPLE WHOSE ARE THE EYES? A NEW BLIND MAN'S BUFF OR BLOW OUT THE CANDLE

Christmas is the supreme season of happiness for children. Their brains are filled with the beautiful imaginations of the good deeds of old Santa Claus. Many of them receive their first strong impressions in discriminating between good and wrong, and the rewards for the former and the punishments for the latter.

The festive character of Christmas being undeniable, nothing can or could be more pleasing to the children and more strictly in accordance with the spirit of the day than a house party.

The day should begin for the child with the finding of his stockings filled with presents, which on the previous evening were hung on the bed post. This pretty custom should be encouraged until the wonderful travels and kindnesses of Santa Claus are looked upon with doubt by the recipient of his bounty.

The children should gather about the Christmas tree as presents are distributed. Of course if the father wants to impersonate Santa Claus so much the better. His appearance will be appreciated by the youngest and cannot be resented by the more experienced ones of 12 or 13 years.

Here are some suggestions in games.

With a sympathetic person assisting the little folks, there should be plenty of fun.

"Whose Are the Eyes?" which has attained great popularity, dimly suggests the Vehmgericht, the secret tribunal of old Westphalia, in which the judges sat closely cowed and with their faces invisible. The game, however, is all mirth. Two of those that take part in it are seated side by side. Over the head of each is placed an outstretched newspaper. In this paper two holes are cut. The paper conceals the head of each of the players beneath and only the eyes are visible through the eye holes. The object of the game is for the rest of the players to guess the ownership of the eyes as they see them by holding a candle close to them.

"Blow Out the Candle." About as popular as this game is "Blow Out the Candle." One of the party is sent from the room. He or she returns blindfolded. A candle burns in the room, around which the other merry-makers are gathered. The blindfolded player must advance to the candle and blow it out.

It looks easy, but it isn't. The thickness of the blind is so dense that the light of the candle cannot be seen

through it and in most cases the puff which should extinguish the candle is directed in the most absurd places.

"Blind Man's Buff." If there is a person who has never played this game, he will undoubtedly seek to conceal the fact. The old can join with the young, and what could cause more merriment than to see uncle bump his knee against the table or mistake Aunt Jane for grandma?

"The Bobbing Apple." This is delight pure and simple. Hang an apple from the ceiling and offer a small prize to the one who is able to grasp it with the teeth without fingering it in any way. Let each child try in turn.

"Musical Chair." This is considered great by the young, especially if there is a good lively player at the piano. Arrange the chairs in a row, having one less than the number of players. When the music suddenly stops each will make an effort to seat himself, but one must be disappointed.

"Charades." The description of charades should have been left for the last, because it affords a true climax. Lucky are the children who can go rummaging and have in store for the party a whole lot of old clothes with which to impersonate the familiar home figures. This game requires an intelligent person to oversee it, and the children should enter into it with much seriousness, which gives an added charm to it. It is great fun to see a little fellow come in wearing an old hat and shawl of his mamma's or a little girl clothed in a large vest with a silk hat pulled down over her ears.

Planning for the older guests on Christmas day should be guided by the aim to have them forget that they are old. To say the least, it is bad form to do and act in such a manner as to continually remind some old grandma that she is nearing the end of her course, when she might be doing her level best to forget it.

Games Are Old as Games. Of course, many of the older guests will indulge in cards, chess or checkers, while others will find their greatest pleasure in assisting the children. But for those that really want to play games in which all can join try these and don't be surprised if one of your guests remarks:

"Why, I played that game when I was a child."
Rather expect it—for very little in the celebration of Christmas is new.

Game of Plum Pudding.
This game has been played for years in this country under many names, but as near as can be learned the above name is proper.

A round piece of wood or a tin pan is provided and titled "Plum Pudding." The company proceed to choose partners by fixing upon two generals, Gen. Kettle and Gen. Pot.

These officers then commence choosing alternately soldiers from among the company, performing the ceremony of conferring title with some unique speech. Kisses might do in place of words when the soldier is a woman.

The titles should be confined to names familiar in the culinary art, as Lieut. Gen. Duck or Carver, Maj. Gen. Muffin or Fork, Col. Coffee Pot or Carrot, Maj. Corkscrew or Ladle, and Private Potato or Peach, and so forth until all the players have been chosen.

The game begins with Gen. Kettle, who takes the "Plum Pudding" (the plate) between his finger and thumb, ready for spinning on the table or floor, and commences his narrative thus:

"As I was sitting on the fire this morning, sputtering with rage at having no enemy to boil, who should come along in a bag and string but old Plum Pudding. The moment he caught sight of me he ran off, I after him. When turning around a corner I saw Maj. Corkscrew—"

At this word Gen. Kettle spins the "Plum Pudding," which it is Maj. Corkscrew's duty to keep up and continue the story until he mentions "Plum Pudding" and the assumed name of another player.

Forfeits are exigible for letting the "Plum Pudding" fall, for speaking of yourself as a human being and for falling to continue the story properly, as by failing in the narrative by calling an enemy by a wrong title.

When enough forfeits have been collected penalties are then imposed by the two generals, the performance of which is required before the forfeit is returned.



In no other city in America is Christmas celebrated in so many different ways as in Washington, for at Washington are gathered the official representatives of every land—Christian as well as pagan—and in the embassies and legations the holiday is celebrated according to the custom in vogue in the countries having representatives there.

So it is that the celebration there is international as well as national in character. Quaint customs, indeed, prevail in the diplomatic corps. In one house you will find Christians commemorating the birth of the Saviour, while in a house across the street a pagan brother from the orient is celebrating an entirely different day, for an entirely different occasion.

Pursuant to a long-established custom, ambassadors and minister plenipotentiaries entertain their official staffs at Christmas, inviting, also, such other friends as they may desire to have visit the legation at that time.

Probably the ambassador from Italy and his wife are the most gracious hosts of any of the foreigners at Washington, and their guests at Christmas time are always welcomed around the Yule log, which burns brightly in the open fireplace. A large urn full of gifts is placed on a table and visitors have great sport getting their presents from out the vast pile.

Germany is the home of the Christmas tree and Kris Kringle. It is, therefore, appropriate that at the Kaiser's embassy the most cosmopolitan Christmas should be celebrated—the custom of the "Faderland" blended with those of the Baroness von Sternberg's "old Kentucky Home."

The family of Senor Casaus, the brilliant Mexican ambassador at Washington, is a happy one, and all of its members join heartily in their native way of celebrating the "Posada." At half past seven on Christmas eve they assemble in a room

ornamented with representations of saints and angels, the Virgin Mary and Joseph, the wise men from the east, shepherds, sheep and oxen. The presents are previously placed on a great earthen tub in the center of the room, and as the young people fall in line and march around the swan, each gives it a blow with a small stick until the bird is broken. Then the fun begins—a scramble for the gifts ensues, followed by games and the usual merry-making.

An American hostess presides over the embassy where floats the tri-colored flag, and joins her welcome with that of her distinguished husband, the French ambassador. Here, again, we find the Yule log burning, and in its glow the Bethlehem manger is represented. Built on a table in the living room, it remains for two weeks of "Noel," a gentle reminder of the sacred meaning of Christmas.

As the Russian embassy, a few blocks distant from the French, Mile. Rosen, the school girl daughter of the czar's ambassador, presides over the Christmas celebration.

Dreams had on that night are supposed to come to pass, and from the Russian standpoint, unlucky is the girl who has no dream to relate while preparing her morning toilet. Early service is attended in the embassy chapel (there is no Greek church in Washington), and then fortune telling games are in order.

The children of the Peruvian legation at Washington will celebrate their Christmas around a "Grotto of the Nativity" in miniature, instead of around the proverbial Christmas tree. This grotto will be surrounded by pots of nonishers of various sizes, with growing plants of different grains, while the gifts will be arranged in and around the whole. These presents are always selected with the greatest care, the object being to have them indicate the progress of the world since the birth of the Christ-child.