

CHRISTMAS TREE

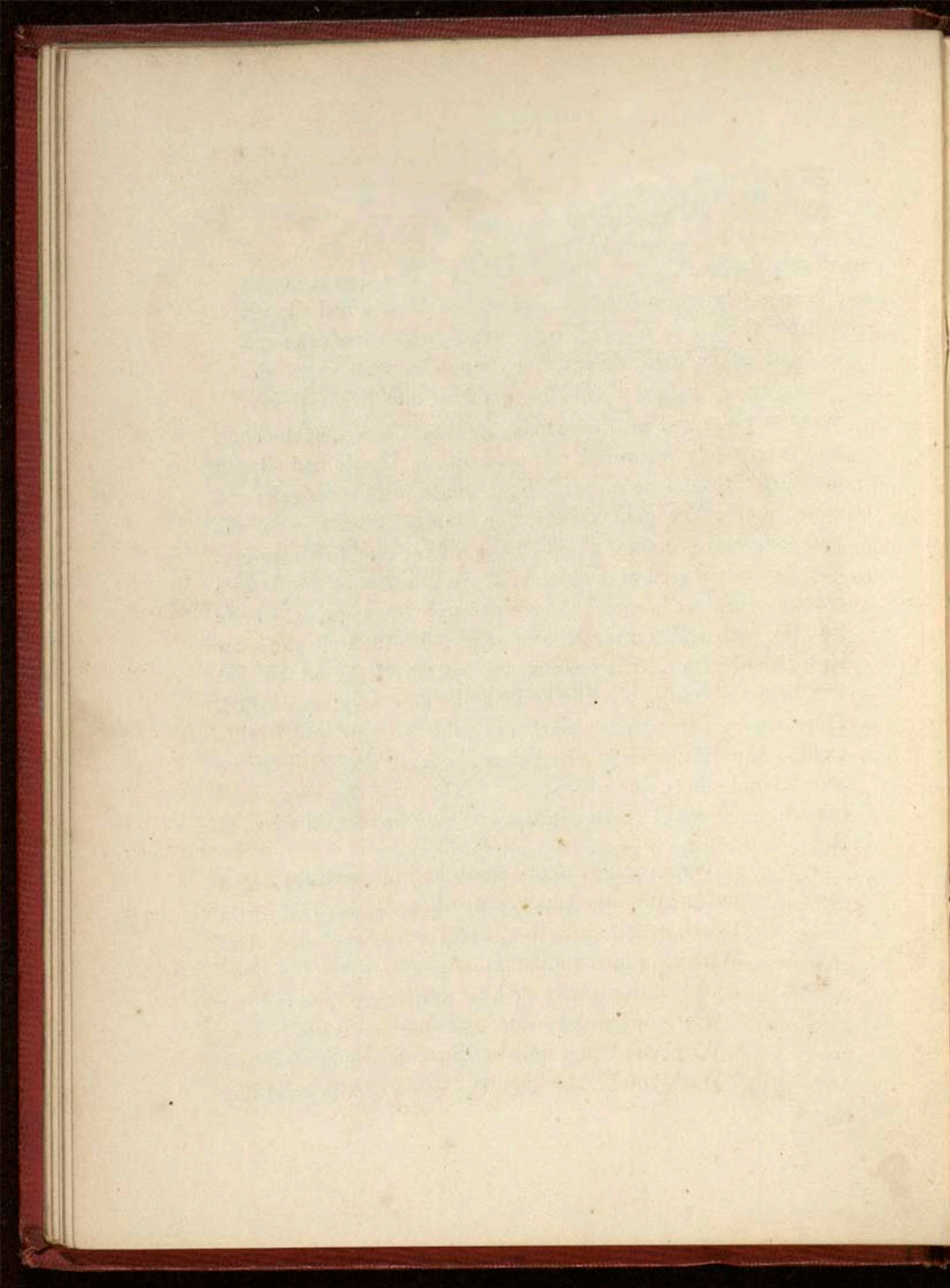
FOR

ALL



YOUNG PEOPLE





THE CHRISTMAS TREE.



Our Christmas at Home.



UR CHRISTMAS at home was always one of the happiest and merriest times of the year. I am no longer a child, for I have a wife and children of my own, and plenty of kind friends who come and visit me both in summer and winter; but as long as I live I shall never forget the pleasant days I spent in the old house in which I was born. It was a good large house, in the middle of a great rambling garden. Wild flowers used to spring up among the grass on the lawn, and deck the hedges by which the fields were surrounded, and creep about the trunks of the old trees in the orchard, and climb up to the eaves of the coach-house, under which the earliest swallows used to

make their nests ; and in nearly all seasons we were able to gather a bunch of them to place on my dear mother's dressing-table before she rose in the morning. My mother was an invalid, and was seldom able to leave the house ; but she was dearly fond of her children, who, I am sure, were very fond of her. And nothing pleased her so much as to see us good and happy. She is gone now, but when we assemble together at Christmas times and birthdays, and such like family meetings, we never fail to talk of her—with tears in the eyes of some of us—and tell each other over and over again what a dear kind mother she was.

Well, summer and winter, we used to romp and play about the old place, as happy as birds, till, as years crept on, first one sister would get married and then another ; a brother or a cousin would depart to try their fortunes in some distant land or city ; and at last only Aunt Jenny and I were left to take care of the "Rookery" and the gardens and fields about. In the course of time we too took flight, and the dear old place was sold. Strangers inhabit it now, and great alterations have been made both within and without its walls. The old elms, with their great colony of black "caw-caws" that gave name to the place, have been removed ; the wild flowers and grass that used to creep up among the stones in the gravel walk have all been rooted out ; the swallows no longer come in the spring to lodge beneath the eaves ; the hedges have all been cut close, so that no idle birds make their nests on the mossy branches. A fine stone porch, with great white pillars and a bright knocker on the door, now occupies the place where the eglantine and the clematis and the dog-rose used to climb about and flower ; paint and paper have taken the

place of ivy and old oak panels ; little rooms have been made larger and cupboards smaller ; the view from the house is no longer obstructed by red thorns, lilacs, laburnums, hollies, and other such common trees ; the grass has been close cropped on the lawn, where buttercups and daisies no longer grow ; a new red brick wall surrounds the paddock instead of the park palings green with moss ; a pair of fine iron gates stand in front of the carriage-drive ; Dame Barton's old cottage has been replaced by a new red brick lodge ; a " visitor's bell " has been hung, the knob of which shines brightly out upon the road ; and, altogether, the old place has been very much " improved." Folks say, at least, that it is much improved ; but, for my part, I love to think of the " Rookery " as it was when I was a boy, rather than look upon it now in its gay dress and its strange unwelcome aspect.

Dear old house ! I love its memory even as I loved its possession. In summer it was gay with the out-of-door music of the birds and the bright colouring the flowers gave to its every nook and corner ; but I think it was gayest and brightest in winter time, or, if it was not, I at least remember our Christmas sports and pastimes better than I do our May-day games and summer festivals. When the snow lay deep on the ground and the trees were bare, then we used to assemble in the old oak-paneled parlour, and tell long tales in the winter evenings, or play at " blind man's buff " in the nursery, or dance in the empty room upstairs : or, better than all, we used to sit round the fire and sing old songs and play forfeits on the warm carpet before my mother's chair.

One night I especially remember ; and as something happened that I love to recollect, and that has more or less influ-

enced all my after-life, I will tell you what we did on one particular Christmas-eve when I was a little boy.

I remember that it was a very severe winter—so severe, indeed, that we had been unable to go out of the house for more than a week, the cold was so intense and the snow had fallen so continuously. We were all of us at home that Christmas: my dear father and mother, my three sisters, and four brothers, as well as my cousins Fred and Harry, with their sisters Lucy and Jane. There were, I know, several other children stopping with us, but at this distance of time I can recollect the name of only one of them, and that was little Jessie Ramsay, who was a distant relation of my father's, and an orphan.

We had been very merry all day, and, as soon as the lights were brought in at tea-time, we came trooping into the parlour from all parts of the house—some from the dairy, where Mary had been making butter; others from the nursery, where they had been playing at soldiers; and the rest from the apple-store over the stable and the school-room, then used only as a play-room, it being holiday time.

We were all assembled in the parlour, and, after tea, my mother told us that we might have a game at romps. We needed no second bidding, and so to play we went in good earnest. We played at Hunt the Slipper and Forfeits, and I don't know how many other games, till we were called into the kitchen for a dance. A good old country dance it was, in which the family, servants, and all joined, noisily enough—all but my mother, who sat under a sort of arbour of holly and other green leaves—for there were always plenty of green leaves and red berries to be got in the garden and orchard,

however severe the winter might be—and encouraged us with kind words and beaming smiles. After we were tired of dancing—which was not soon, I assure you—a great china bowl of raisins was brought in by John the butler, who acted occasionally as gardener and coachman as well, and was, in fact, a sort of Jack-of-all-trades. What fun there was, to be sure, as we ran dancing and singing round the lighted bowl, snatching the plums from the blue flames of the burning spirit, till they were all gone and the blue flames burned themselves out. Well, Snap-dragon over, we had kisses under the Mistletoe; and I recollect quite well how we all laughed when Papa took Betty the cook under the white-berried bough and gave her a great loud kiss.

But our fun had not yet ended. At a signal from my mother, we followed her into the dining-room on the other side of the passage. Here a sight awaited us that surprised us one and all. The room was brilliantly lighted up with wax candles on sconces from the walls; and on the table in the centre there was placed a great Christmas Tree, hung all over with little lamps and bon-bons, and toys and sweetmeats and bags of cakes. It was the first tree of the kind that I and my companions had ever seen. It was quite a new-fashion the Christmas Tree; and my brother Tom, who had just come home from Germany, had superintended its getting up and decoration. With what shouts of joy we hailed the pretty Christmas Tree, and with what glee and laughter we began to search among its twinkling lights and bright green leaves for the toys and sweetmeats that were hanging there, each one with a name written on its envelope, I can hardly tell you. But we were very merry, I know, and very grateful to our dear mother for

her care in providing this delightful surprise as a finish to our merry evening's sports. Suddenly, in the very midst of our gaiety, someone cried out, "Where's little Jessie Ramsay?"

We looked about the room, but she was not among us. We were not at all alarmed at first, I remember, for we thought she had but gone into one of the other rooms. We soon spread ourselves about the house shouting "Jessie! Jessie!" but no answer came to our summons, and we began to get frightened; then we asked of each other, "Who saw her last?" but nobody recollected seeing her after cousin Harry had kissed her under the mistletoe. The servants ran into the garden and looked everywhere that it was thought likely she could have hidden herself; but she was nowhere to be found. It was very strange. Everybody loved the gentle little girl, and you may be sure that there was much concern expressed about her unaccountable absence. There were many tears shed too, I remember; but, as tears would not bring her back again, we recommenced our search about the house and among the trees in the garden. What was to be done nobody could guess, and you may be sure all our fun was over for that evening. Concern and inquiry sat on every face, but every face gave back the puzzled, anxious look without solving the difficulty. The servants were questioned, but none of them recollected having noticed the child long after the dance was over.

At last some one said he shouldn't wonder if the gipsies, who had encamped in the lane, had taken her away for her clothes. "No, no," replied my mother, "that could not be, for the gipsies were the same harmless people who had been used to come every winter and camp near the Rookery."

But still it was thought right to inquire, and so John was sent down the lane with the lantern, my father and two or three of the elder guests accompanying him. But they soon came back with the news that the gipsies had broken up their camp in the morning, and were now some miles away, having been seen at midday in a village on the other side of the river. Puzzled and confused, search was then made in the well and the fish-pond beyond the paddock; but the ice on the surface of the water was undisturbed, and no footmarks were to be found on the snow near the well. Bedrooms and beds were searched, cupboards and pantries were carefully looked into, boxes and trunks were opened and shut in vain; Jessie Ramsay was nowhere to be found.

At last it was suggested by my mother that the younger children should be put to bed, while my father and brothers should go on through the wood to the village, a mile away, and make further inquiry for the poor lost child.

Well, we were put to bed; but I for one did not get much sleep that night, for I was continually awaking to listen for my father's return. The dog howled in the stable, and I could not help thinking a good deal of the stories I had heard about dogs crying beneath the window when one of the family was expected to die. A bat dashed up against my window, and I could hear the click-click of a cricket in the fire-place down stairs; and so altogether I passed a very restless sort of night. As soon as it was light in the morning I dressed myself and went down stairs. I found all the family up and dressed, but my father and brothers had not returned, and nothing had been heard of little Jessie. Breakfast-time came, and once more the family assembled together in my mother's

parlour. Very sad and silent we were, and nothing was talked of but the little girl's strange disappearance.

In about an hour my father and brothers returned, looking very tired and vexed, for they had heard nothing of Jessie. They sat down wearily enough to breakfast, and were talking about recommencing their search, when Tom the stable-boy came in to say that Rover the dog had somehow broken loose and gone away.

"Well, Tom," said my father, "I suppose he'll come back again when he's hungry. You need not alarm yourself about him."

"Ay, ay, sir," said the boy.

"Poor Rover!" I said, "he was very restless all night, and I could hear him crying and howling as if he wanted to get loose."

"And so could I," said my mother. "Suppose, dear, you send Tom out to see if you can find him. We shall have but a sad Christmas-day if two of our family are lost."

"Well, Tom," replied my father, "you may as well look about the place; Rover cannot be far away."

Off set Tom and two or three of us youngsters with him. It had been snowing all night, so that the ground was covered deep in a pure white robe, and only the footmarks of my father and brothers could be traced, as they had come home through the wood from the village.

We had not been gone far—in fact, we had scarcely got out of the garden—before we heard the distant bark of a dog. It was very faint and weak, but I thought that I recognised Rover's voice. We went farther on towards the wood, at the entrance to which was the cottage of the poor old bed-ridden

Dame Roberts. As we came near to the old cottage we heard the bark again, louder and more distinctly. This time we felt certain it was Rover, so we pushed on as fast as we could, tramping over our ankles in the soft snow carpet that covered all the ground. When we arrived at Dame Roberts's door, I thought I would stay a moment, just to see how the old lady got on, and to inquire if she had heard of our sad loss.

Tom and the rest stopped a minute while I pulled the string of the latch and went in. The old dame's bed was in the inner room. There were only two rooms in the cottage, in one of which slept the old lady's son, Giles, the carter, and the outer door was never fastened with anything but a latch by either night or day. I found Dame Roberts sitting up in bed getting her scanty breakfast, and by the side of her cup I noticed a slice of currant cake.

"Ah, my dear," she said as I entered, "and how are you? I suppose you wonder at my having nice cake for breakfast, but my dear little friend Jessie Ramsay came all the way through the snow last night to bring it to me."

"Jessie brought it!" I exclaimed; "and where is she now?"

"Why, at home at the Rookery, to be sure," replied the old woman.

"No, dame," said I, "she is not at home; she has not been home all night, and we cannot find her anywhere."

The old lady's consternation at this unexpected news was great indeed. I was making further inquiries about the lost Jessie, when just at that moment Tom and the boys called into the house, "Charley, Charley, here's the dog!"

I ran out of the cottage directly. There was Rover, all hot and impatient, barking and tearing about, and evidently in great distress. As soon as he caught sight of me, he ran up and began pulling me by the trousers with his teeth, and barking loudly. I did not at first know what the dog meant; but when he ran a little way forward and then came back, wagging his tail and looking up into our faces, and then running away again, we knew that he wished us to follow him.

A new hope sprung up in my breast as we followed after Rover through the snow. The road he took was towards home, in an almost direct line across the fields from Dame Roberts's cottage. He ran so fast that it was as much as we could do to keep up with him. Presently he stopped, made a jump into a hollow, and disappeared. You may be sure we were quickly upon his heels. In a minute more Tom, the stable-boy, raised a great shout, and we were all of us with him on the edge of the old marl pit. Stretching myself on the ground, I looked over the edge, and there at the bottom I saw our dear Jessie caressing the dog.

I cannot describe our joy at this happy discovery. I can only tell you that it was not long before I reached the spot where she stood, though how I got there I shudder to think, so deep was the pit; nor many minutes before assistance had been brought from the Rookery, and little Jessie had been carried home in triumph. What laughter and tears, what kisses and congratulations, what shouts of joy rang through the house, I well remember. It was as if a great weight had been suddenly lifted off the hearts of all the inmates of the Rookery. From master to servant all seemed delighted to

think that dear little Jessie had not been stolen by the gipsies, but had only been "snowed up" on Christmas-eve, and had got home again in time to take a good hearty nap before dinner on Christmas-day. Nor was the good dog Rover forgotten in the midst of the caresses and congratulations that hailed our Jessie's return.

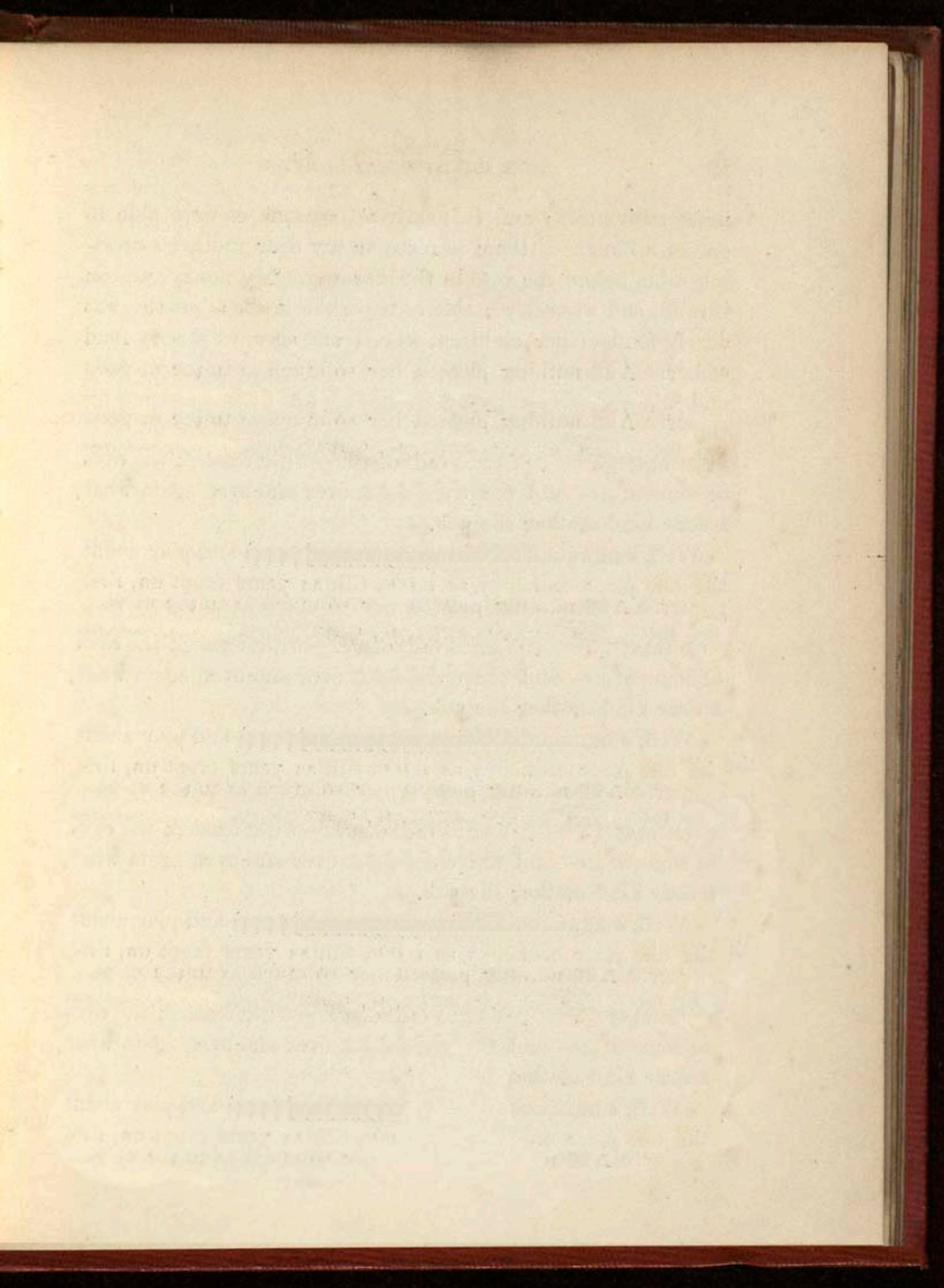
It was not a slight matter that same "snowing up," though everybody seemed willing to make light of it now that the child had been safely recovered. It appears that Jessie had slipped away from the house soon after the dance, with some cake and wine, and other nice things, for Dame Roberts, who she had long ago promised should have a feast on Christmas-eve. She had not stayed above two or three minutes at the dame's cottage, and was hastening back through the snow, when she lost the path and fell into the marl pit. Fortunately the snow had drifted into a little heap at the bottom of the pit, so that her fall was broken, or she would most likely have been killed. Here she remained all night, very cold, hungry, and frightened. She did not cry, she told us, because she felt sure we should find where she was at last. How the dog discovered her we never could make out, but you may be certain that old Rover was always a great favourite after that.

And so the Christmas-day that had begun so sadly was ended joyously and noisily. Nobody could make enough of little Jessie, whose kindness, charity, and pity for the poor, had almost cost her her life. I am sure I couldn't, for I seemed to fear her even getting out of my sight that day and for many days after. I needn't tell you that we made a very merry Christmas of it, and that Jessie's health was drank with all the honours, coupled with the name of the good dog Rover.

And I will tell you a secret, if you will promise not to mention it further. You promise? Well, then, some dozen years after, Jessie Ramsay being very much pestered with the polite attentions of some twenty young gentlemen who *would* visit the Rookery continually, determined to change her name; and so I persuaded her to take mine instead.

G. F. P.





CHRISTMAS



THREE

FOR

ALL



THE YOUNG PEOPLE

