

A CHRISTMAS-BOX.

What shall I send as a Christmas-box:
To a bright little fairy with golden locks,
With big blue eyes, and a smile more sweet
Than any plum-pudding can hope to beat?
Then Frank, her brother—that lovely boy—
Should receive as his gift some noiseless toy;
And her sister Nellie, though scarcely three,
Duly considered in turn must be.

Shall I resort, as I've done before,
To the Loothee Arcade's unbounded store,
Of dolls that can open and shut their eyes
Till they thrill the beholder with glad surprise:
Of drums, of trumpets, of tambourines,
And other dainty sound-machines;
And ask where Noah, with all his crew,
Could have made a Calenso prove them true?

Nay, none of the Christmas boxes here
Will thoroughly meet my plans, I fear.
For father and mother I'd fain prescribe,
As well as for imps of the tiny tribe,
To the Temple of Thespis I'll take my way
(Both elders and youngsters love "the play");
'Twere better, perchance, at this festive time,
If I sent them a Box for a Pantomime!

THE ROBBERY AT THE HALL.

I don't know how often my nephew Charles has asked me to write down my recollections of sundry episodes in my life. Of course I know well enough it is half chaff on his part when he says it is a pity the world should lose them; and I also know, when the subject was mooted to his father (my junior by just two years), he said, in his usual coarse way, "The old fool is conceited enough for anything." Let all this pass. Charles is my favourite nephew, and half a dozen idle words won't make me quarrel with my brother.

We belong to one of the oldest families in the kingdom. It appears that in 1476 a small grant of land was made to one Michael Stonnor, for services rendered to Edward IV. during his French campaign. My ancestors must have been thrifty, for in 1640 it had grown large enough to attract the unwelcome attention of the Round-heads, who destroyed the mansion and appropriated what revenue they could. We came in again with Charles II., and my father succeeded to the estate with scarcely a break in the family tree. He, poor soul, was one of the finest men of his time; but his reverend name is no protection against my brother's love of a good joke. I am sorry to say I have heard him tell story after story at the expense of his memory. One in particular, as showing how the split occurred between us and the Anstruthers, he narrates with greatunction.

It appears that my father was very intimate with a young Edward Anstruther, who died while they were travelling together on the Continent. A visit of condolence to Anstruther Park followed, during which he walked round the famous picture gallery with Sir George, and, stepping before one of the portraits, examined it with considerable emotion. At last, turning to his host, he said: "How happily the artist has caught poor Ned's winning smile." The picture was, unfortunately, a study for the head of Barabbas. Now whether the story is true or not for my part I don't believe one word of it; it is certainly very bad taste for my brother to repeat it. Alas! no ties protect you from a professional *raconteur*. Even I am not free. In the agonies of gout I am told I am enjoying one of the privileges of the head of the house; and the theft of the family plate, of which more hereafter, and other misfortunes are made the subjects of so many standing jokes.

My father was not only a thorough gentleman of the old school, but in his day the handsomest man about town. I am told I strongly resemble him. This annoys my brother. Poor Robert! he is a good-looking enough man, but plain for a Stonnor.

Then again he belongs to what is called an advanced school of politicians, while the Stonnors from time immemorial have consistently supported the fire old bulwarks of the Constitution. I can give my adherence to neither of the present political parties, and have therefore repeatedly refused to represent my county in Parliament. Parliament indeed! I should as soon think of being elected mayor, or provost, or beadle, of a town, as of being elected M. P. now-a-days. Not that I wish to shirk any political question. No. I don't wish to get rid of them as a worthy Scotch friend of mine disposes of the utterances of Mr. Tyndall and Mr. Huxley. He calls them "legs"—an honest enough confession of ignorance, but not one to be used by me. Oratory, too! Don't talk to me about the power of oratory, I know all about it. I have it myself. Many a time in my solitary rambles have tears come to my eyes at the words that have gushed from me on some of the burning topics of the day. But I don't use this power simply because I happen to have it; it is not in a gentleman's province to do so. The same with writing; I have no scruples about it. The Stonnors have always been pretty ready with their pens. Why, my grand-uncle's "Letters on the Times," written after the model of Lord Chesterfield, and considered by some superior to his, had a European celebrity, and a well-preserved copy can be seen even now in most of the libraries of our county gentlemen.

No, I have no scruples. The great thing is to have something to write about; and, notwithstanding my brother's cynical remarks, it is not improbable that the personal recollections of a gentleman in my position, however fragmentary and disconnected, may be eagerly read by a select class of readers.

It is very odd that every little adventure that

befalls me seems to afford him such amusement. The more unpleasant it happens to be the more he exaggerates it, twisting and turning the details till so many standing jokes are scored up against me, and I am thus compelled, in self-defence, to write true versions of them. Questionable taste, to say the least of it, this holding up the head of the house to ridicule; but, as I said before, I will not be a party to an undignified quarrel; besides, at heart, I believe he has an honest affection for me.

Only the other day he kept my table in roars of laughter by narrating the story of the loss of the family plate. Why, he was himself partly the cause of it! It was he who persuaded me to hire a yacht, and if it had not been for that yacht the misfortune would not have occurred.

He bothered me about a boat. My father kept one, and I ought not to let the custom drop. I could afford it, and he couldn't. Then it would be such a grand opportunity for his son Charles, the artist, to explore fresh sketching-ground. Dr. Pascal, the traveller, who was staying with him at the time, backed him up by talking of ozone and iodine and the health-giving properties of salt air.

"Yes," said my brother, "our father went for his health, you know. He liked a yacht, because it possessed such convenient capabilities for eating and sleeping. He would never take any one with him who was not a good sleeper. This was a *zine quid non*. You must be able to drop off at a moment's notice, like the fat boy in 'Pickwick.' After meals, during which I have no doubt he enlightened his guests on the general magnificence of the Stonnors, they would put up their legs without moving from their seats, and snore away till the next meal. He was musical in his sleep, too, and old Barton said, when he came back from a cruise with him, that 'Stonnor could blow his own trumpet even in his sleep.'"

"Really, Robert," I said, "I don't think you need entertain Dr. Pascal with our father's peculiarities."

"Oh, but there is a better joke than that," he went on. "Do you know, Pascal, he took a sheep on board, that he might have a fresh kidney for breakfast every morning."

"Ah," laughed Pascal, "I suspect your father's physiological researches had been confined to poultry; but, joking apart, a sea-trip would do your brother good."

"Look here, Peter," said Robert: there is a rare chance for you just now. You can hire the *Fedra*, a forty tonner, lying at her moorings in the Gareloch, all ready for sea. Be off, and show Charles the West Highlands."

"Well, well," I said at last, "don't bother me any more. Send Charles up to Scotland, and if he likes the craft we will try a cruise."

Four days later I joined my nephew on the Gareloch. What a lovely scene it was from the deck of our craft! Beautifully wooded hills on either side of us, here and there crowned with heather, and between them the sea all green and gold sparkling up for five or six miles till stopped by a grand range of purple hills. These stretched right across the landscape, and were called Argyle's Bowling Green.

"A curious name," I said to our skipper, Captain McGosh. "Is it possible that the Argyle family ever played bowls on such extremely rugged ground?"

"Oh, ay!" he replied. "The Macallum More would mount you steep hill before breakfast, and roll the big stones down from the top—just for exercise ye ken. You may see the rocks they hurled down to this very day lying all about the shores of Loch Gail and Loch Long."

Dear me, what Titans these old Scotch fellows must have been! I looked in vain, however, for any remains of their strongholds. Nothing to be seen but the most objectionable of pretty villas, with eagles and statues before the doors, the largest being a sort of Greek temple belonging to the Duke of Argyle himself.

We were amused at the eccentric behaviour of some person sketching on the shore close by us; he would gaze bareheaded at the landscape, rush to his easel, dab on some paint, then fall back on the bank and gaze at the sky. Suddenly he would rise and repeat the operation. We watched and watched, till at last Charles got so interested that we landed to see what he was doing. We found him in a sort of swoon. A young man with fair hair brushed straight back from his forehead, dreamy blue eyes looking into vacancy, an aquiline nose, and a thin-lipped mouth.

"I beg your pardon," Charles began. "Who is it that speaks?" he said, jumping up. "Ah, gentlemen, it is I who should ask pardon; but my thoughts were far away."

"I see you are an artist," said my nephew, "and I thought perhaps you could give me some hints as to the subjects about here."

"I wish it was in my power to assist you," he replied; but the fact is, I am lately come from Germany, and am seeking sketching-ground myself. You are almost the first person I have spoken to."

"Well, I am sorry we have disturbed you."

"Not at all. It was kind of you to notice a stranger. Will you look at my work? The question is, whether you would paint the *Seen* or the *Unseen*? Look at this."

Charles looked puzzled.

"Bless my soul," I exclaimed, "it is a regiment of soldiers!"

"Exactly," he said, "a regiment of soldiers from the great cloud army. There they are clothed in blood red, to do battle with the world.

See how they overthrow the mountains, and blot them out from mortal eyes! See how they frown upon the waters! This is how I see a landscape—not as a copy of hill and water, but as a triumph of spiritualism over the material world!"

"I can't make it out," said Charles bluntly.

"I distinctly see the soldiers," said I.

"It is comforting to meet any one who has your perceptive faculty, sir," said the stranger to me. "Depend upon it, if you say of a landscape, 'how like the spot!' it is a bad picture, because the spiritual has been sacrificed to the material. The same also of a portrait. How easy to make it like by accentuating some commonplace peculiarity. The true painter's aim should be, not only to paint the soul of the man, but also to show what traditions belong to him, and what portent they have. You will pardon my rudeness," he continued, "but your face plainly speaks of a long history."

"You are right!" I answered. Extraordinary as the guests, you are perfectly right. I am the representative of one of the oldest families in Britain. The Stonnors, sir, date back to Edward the Fourth—a pretty long history!"

"It is, sir," he said, with a polite bow; "but there was no need of your assuring me of the fact. It is written on your face."

"I'll be hanged if I can make out how you can paint the 'Unseen' though!" said Charles.

"That is because the new light is too dazzling for your eye," replied the stranger; but it will come. However, if you are fond of the 'Seen' I have a folio of German sketches that would interest you. Will you honour me by looking at them?"

"Certainly," I replied. "Come and dine on board the *Fedra*, and we will inspect them during the long evening."

I liked this young fellow. There was a deferential air about him that is sadly missing in most young men of the present day. My nephew did not at first share in my admiration, but began to alter his opinion after looking at the drawings. They were distinctly different from what we had seen on the shore. Small literal transcripts of Dutch scenery, quaint figures, boats, buildings, all drawn with great skill and care, and all signed Edward Hansen. My nephew raved about their artistic merits, and talked German art with Hansen all the evening.

After this we saw a great deal of him. We were detained for provisions, and the young men sketched and fished together, till Charles, with his usual contradictory and impulsive way, took such a liking for the young German that he accompanied us on our cruise.

We had a happy time. We explored the Clyde Lochs, sailed round the Mull of Cantire, and saw most of the coast lately made famous by Mr. Black and Mr. Colin Hunter. Our skipper was invaluable. His memory was marvellous—no place of interest but what he knew every legend and story connected with it. He told us of the Piper of Dantroon, of Dancing Peter of Kilmahonig, and of the strange sounds to be heard at Corneveckan. We had no need for guide-books. Hansen drank in these legends with avidity. He was a strange, gentle creature, thoroughly gentlemanlike and unselfish, making himself useful to my nephew and myself in a thousand little ways, till he became almost indispensable to our comfort. We found out that he was in reduced circumstances, and I was glad to be able, at my nephew's suggestion, to purchase the folio of drawings.

His fits of abstraction were absolutely painful to witness. They appeared also to be accompanied with considerable physical suffering, and at these times he would pace the deck for hours, refusing both food and drink.

I remember when at Mull we were looking at Aros Castle from the sea when McGosh observed, "You're the rock where Maclaine slew his daughter. Will I be telling' ye about it? Weel, the Maclaines were always famous for their good looks; but this young lassie was the most beautiful cratur that was ever seen whatever. She was as graceful as a rose, or one of the siller birks on Ben Linn. Peoples would come from all 'roon about just to look at her face, ye ken, and her lang yellow hair was the pride of the country. The auld laird he was a proud, passionate man. He loved his daughter, but he hated a Sassenach like pain. Was it no unfortunate now that when he was awa' a young English spark should come to the island, and fall streicht off in love wi' bonnie Miss Ellen! She, puir thing, learned to love this stranger, and they used to whisper their vows on yonder rock. But evil tongues did their work. The auld laird he returns all unbeknown to them, and finds Miss Ellen on the rock where she had just parted frae her lover. Ah, man, there was an awfu' scene! the laird he upbraided her, and vowed if she didn't gie up her English lover he would throw her into the water."

"Na," says she: 'I've plighted my troth, and a Maclaine never broke a vow.'

"Then he asked her again, and she wadna. Sae he seizes her yellow hair, and awirled her round and round over his head, and drops her plump, plash into the water."

"Weel, Mr. Stonnor, after this nothing prospered with the laird. His sons were killed in battle; he lost his money abroad; his cattle died at home; and at last the auld man came back to Aros just to dee."

"Weel, sir, the morning of his death nothing would do but that he must be moved up to yonder wundow to look ower the sea. And, lo! there upon the rock was seated puir Ellen, with her yellow hair all blowing in the wind. When

the laird saw this, he gave a great cry, and de'd streicht off, and at the vera same moment Ellen's ghastly gave a groan, and jumped plump, plash into the water. The folks all say, sir, that she is to be seen to this vera day seated on yonder rock when any trouble is coming to the Maclaines."

"Curiously enough," I said, "there is a legend of a somewhat similar character attached to our family. The story goes that some time during the last century there was a certain Miss Lettice Stonnor who had offended her father in the same way as poor Ellen Maclaine, and was in consequence in a close prison by him in one of the rooms in Stonnor Hall. She was treated with so much harshness that at last she threw herself out of the window in despair. There used to be some story of a ghost, but not in my time. The room, however, remains untouched, and I can show it to you now. There is a curious old inscription carved in oak over the fireplace. It is worded thus: 'Your lettuce grows within the garden, but our Lettice buds in Paradise.'"

Poor Hansen listened spell-bound, and subsequently had an unusually severe fit of abstraction. So wretchedly ill did he look in the morning that I determined to speak to him.

"Mr. Stonnor," he said, grasping my hand, "the sympathy of a gentleman of your high position is one of the most precious comforts I have experienced. I am a most unfortunate person. You see how these legends affect me. The fact is, sir, I have the misfortune to be *en rapport* with the spiritual world. Why the mantle should have fallen upon me, I cannot tell, but so it is—and the suffering it entails is dreadful. I believe I am the most powerful medium known. The manifestations that have been elicited through me in Germany have had the effect of ruining my health. The expenditure of *oké force* has rendered me as weak as an infant. I can no longer produce such sketches as those you have lately purchased from me. I flew from Germany to distract my thoughts, and to avoid being made use of by the Spiritualists. In your society I have been happier; but still you see—I suffer."

"Is there anything then," I asked, "in this Spiritualism?"

"Anything, Mr. Stonnor? Oh, I wish there was not!"

"I have always thought that it was conspired by our learned men as humbug."

"Yes," he replied sadly, "all the higher truths suffer from modern scepticism. But the position of Spiritualism is very simple. We are acquainted with two classes of phenomena, one visible—such as day and night, the movements of planets and tides; the other mysterious, invisible, and unsolved—we call some of these electricity, galvanism, gravitation; but there still remains an abundance of powerful forces unknown and undeveloped."

Perhaps, by-and-by, science may be able to explain it all."

"I cannot tell, neither can I account for the manifestations. But surely there may be a higher and more subtle force than either electricity, light, or heat? It may be invoked unaccountably, or the latent force may exist only in a few."

"You interest me; but of course I have not studied the—"

"Pardon me for interrupting you; but that is the very reason why your calm judgment would be invaluable. A great mind like yours—unfettered by study, and free from school traditions, one that has lain dormant in its strength—would bring a new light on the subject."

"I dare say I could do something towards elucidating it," I said. "The Stonnors have generally succeeded in what they undertake."

"I am sure of it," he replied, "and I feel relieved now that I have unburdened my mind to you."

This was the first of many conversations we had on the subject. My interest was roused, not so much at Spiritualism itself as at the knowledge of finding a power of philosophical reasoning within me which I had been hitherto unaware of. One evening we had a little seance. The manifestations were slight, but quite enough to convince me. He was especially pleased at my explanation of some of the phenomena. "We will pursue the subject," I said, "but in the meantime I should like to see you more cheerful!"

"The prospect of parting makes me sad," he replied.

"Surely you are not going to leave us?" I asked.

"I am only too happy where I am," he said; but I have a presentiment that we shall be parted soon."

"Then we shall meet again at Stonnor Hall," I rejoined gaily.

Oddly enough it happened as he predicted, for at Oban I found letters that called me home. One from India telling me that my niece had sailed for England and was coming to the Hall. The trouble consequent on the death of her child, some two or three years old, had so preyed upon her health that her husband had packed her off by the first steamer; the other from my brother, saying she had arrived, and offering to come and finish the cruise with his son. I set off at once—arranging that my brother should join the yacht at Oban, and that Hansen should then come and pay a visit to Stonnor Hall.

I found that the young wife had picked up her health and spirits during the voyage, but that she might have a cheerful companion, I asked Mrs. Randall Rawson and her husband to spend a few days with us.

(To be continued.)