

any written composition,—several paragraphs of apology; for although I firmly believe every word of the foregoing, I am bound to confess that it amounts to nothing more nor less than an apology, for a story which will contain neither philosophising, moralising, nor information, but is merely the recital of the sayings and doings of a few boys and girls—I may almost call them men and women—who, as I introduce them, are rejoicing in their youth and in their health, and in their money; yes, in their money, for their money had always been part of them; and a very good thing it is when one is young and does not abuse the privilege of possessing it, as perhaps not one of these has ever done. Those who are not at all jealous of their manifold blessings will, I hope, really enjoy making a separate and individual acquaintance with these young people, who rejoice most of all because it is the blessed Christmas Eve, and who are merrily preparing for the festivities of to-morrow.

In the first place then a little retrospection is necessary. Please carry your mind back to the twenty-fourth of December, eighteen hundred and seventy-one; and a very stormy twenty-fourth of December it was too, and very cold for Christmas-tide, in one of the most southern of the Midland States, as all who live in that part of the Union will well remember.

The wind swept up from the Atlantic, not many miles distant, bringing with it hail and snow. Even the snow was hard and cutting, with nothing soft or gentle or poetical about it,—just such snow as people will not tolerate anywhere south, say of New Brunswick. And the wind and sleet and snow, each trying to get first and hit hardest, drove up a long avenue of oaks and maples, or some sort of trees; I have not sufficient arborical knowledge to distinguish the different species, when there is not a leaf to be seen, and when the branches are all equally bare and brown and snow-laden. The contending forces were as ignorant as I, and cared as little what the trees were, so long as they suited their purpose, by enclosing a sort of skirmishing ground, along which they could try their strength, and out of which they could make a grand rush at what seemed to be the principal object of their spite, namely, a large, comfortable stone house standing at the head of the avenue. The numerous turrets and towers of this house faced the fury of the elements with steady indifference, never bending or quivering,—a fact that is accounted for by their having nothing decayed, shaky and aristocratic about them, but being merely sub-