

WE MEET ON CHRISTMAS DAY.

The amber sky is glowing,
The leafless branches sway;
The dying breezes whisper,
"A year has past away."
Farewell to sapphire splendour
Of summer-tinted skies,
And scented winds' low whisper,
And bending flowers' replies.

I hear the joy-bells ringing—
So near, so far away—
This happy message bringing,
"We meet on Christmas Day."
And though the world be cheerless,
And though the skies be gray,
For me the air is golden
As any summer's day.

Beneath the hroning branches
(Our last farewell was said,
With golden sunlight glancing
Through leaves of golden red;
Around us all the wonders
Of Nature's slow decay;
But loud as crashing thunders
Our welcome rings to-day.

Although the year is dying,
To me its death is life,
And end of weary sighing,
And peace to weary strife.
While every pulse is thrilling,
And bounding to the sway
Of passion, madly ringing,
"We meet on Christmas Day."

I know sweet eyes will brighten,
And sweetest blushes burn,
And dark-lashes darken
Over looks for which I yearn,
Of all glad hearts the gladdest
Will be my own—to say,
"My love and I who love her
Will meet on Christmas Day."

RITA.

Christmas-Eve Chit Chat.

"How delightfully the wind is whistling and howling out of doors! This beating of sheet against the window-panes gives a true local coloring to the hour, a suitable prelude to Christmas-day. Draw the curtains, Mrs. Fitzplantagenet, if you please; stir the fire, but don't light either lamp or candle. There is no need to remove the dessert quite yet. And now, Doctor, I have a great desire to know what is your real opinion about Ghosts."

Here cousin Eliza, as merry as she is pretty, whose husband could not arrive till Christmas morning, and our old household friend Mademoiselle Honorine, drew closer to the fire and to each other.

"I am not sure," the Doctor answered, "whether I have an opinion respecting apparitions or not. Medical men are mostly regarded as sceptics; they are not so if by that is meant that they are universal unbelievers. But they will not believe without sufficient proof, or at least reasonable ground for their belief. Their training leads them to inquire: they are in the habit of investigating cause and purpose, which saves them from weak credulity. But they are the last to deny the difficulty of explaining certain phenomena. There are not a few cases of apparitions which can be accounted for no better than by the merest guess. One occurs to me which made a great impression at the time, although it happened long ago."

"In 1792 Sir Charles Lee's daughter (whose mother had died in giving her birth, and who had been admirably brought up by her maternal aunt Lady Everard) was engaged to Sir William Perkins; but the realization of the marriage was prevented thus: One night, perceiving a light in her chamber, she called her maid to ask why she had left a light burning. The servant replied that there was no other light in the room except that which she had just brought into it, that the fire had quite gone out, and that her young mistress had probably been dreaming. Fully convinced that such was the case, Miss Lee went to sleep again. Awakening at about two in the morning, she beheld a little lady, who said she was her mother, that her destined fate was a happy one, and that she would come to her again at noon the same day."

"A dream, dear Doctor?"
"Which perhaps might not be all a dream. Miss Lee once more summoned her maid, dressed herself, and then went into her cabinet, where she remained till nine in the morning. She then told her aunt Lady Everard what had happened, and gave her a sealed letter, to be delivered to her father immediately after her decease. The aunt, believing her niece to be smitten with sudden insanity, sent to Chelmsford for a doctor and a surgeon, who came at once. They could discover no symptom of mental derangement; but Lady Everard insisted that she should be tried, which was done."

"And which had better have been let alone," Undoubtedly; but it was the fashion of the day, and the young lady allowed them to do as they pleased. She begged that the chaplain might come to pray with her; after which she took her guitar and her psalm-book, and, seated in a chair, played and sang to such perfection that her music-master, who was present, was charmed and astonished. A little before noon she arose, went and reclined in a large arm-chair, and, after one or two sighs, suddenly expired. The doctor and the surgeon were surprised at the rapidity with which her body grew cold and stiff. She died at Waltham, in the county of Essex, three miles from Chelmsford. The letter was sent to Sir Charles in Warwickshire. He was so overcome by the sad event

that he did not arrive until after the funeral. In compliance with his daughter's wish expressed in her letter, her body was exhumed and buried beside her mother at Edmonton. The authenticity of the story is vouched for by the then Bishop of Gloucester, who had it from the lips of the young lady's father. I can only suggest, as a natural explanation, that with an impressionable girl the imagination would be wonderfully over-excited as the supposed fatal hour approached, that the strain on the nervous system, in a probably delicate frame, would be more than the vital force could sustain. The revelation or vision might have been only a chance coincidence; for without it the history would never have been recorded. It is certain that a great many apparitions have been seen without being followed by any important event; consequently they have fallen into oblivion, while those connected with any apparent sequel have been religiously retained in people's memories."

"My dear old grandmother," said Mademoiselle Honorine, "was a case in point. She enjoyed a strong bodily constitution, was a sheep-walker—not often; but two or three times a year she would get out of bed and wander about. She often heard, if she did not see, ghosts. She had presentiments and dreams, some of which came true and caused a sensation, and some of which, not coming true, were thought no more of. For one thing, however, she believed that she should reach a good old age, which, indeed, she did."

"That belief and the wish helped her to do so. People may die of despondency and of the fear of death. The vulgar advice to "Never say die" is most excellent counsel."

"Gran'mère held on to existence in this world hard and fast, and was sometimes curious to know how long she was likely to last. One night she dreamed, or had a vision, I forget which, of a priest who visited her clad in the vestments worn at masses for the dead, and holding a black tablet, which he showed her, on which were inscribed in white two figures of eight separated by a band, thus: 8—8. As soon as she had had a good look at the inscription he vanished without speaking a word. Naturally she interpreted this to mean that she would live to be eighty-eight, and no longer. Still, what could the line between the figures mean? But the intervening bar was soon forgotten, while the figures remained impressed upon her memory—so much so that when her eighty-eighth year drew near its close we had great difficulty in calming her apprehensions and keeping her alive. The last day she resolved to sit up till midnight, firmly expecting to take her departure before that critical moment arrived. We put all the clocks back three-quarters of an hour, and when they struck twelve, convinced her, by our watches, that it was then a quarter to one in the morning, congratulating her on having at last got over the ominous eighty-eight without accident. She lived to be ninety, and yet the vision was verified: she was born in 1758 and died in 1848. The spectral formula, "8—8," truly symbolized her term of life. Happily for the repose of her declining years, she was unable to read the hieroglyphic aright. There, Doctor, you have my evidence. I may now retire from the witness-box?"

"You may, mademoiselle, and with the unanimous thanks and compliments of the court. Mrs. Fitzplantagenet looks as if she wished to catch the Speaker's eye."

"Yes; if you will kindly listen to the little which I have to tell you. When I was young, I was—ahem!—a very pretty girl. No people said; whether truly or not, you can guess from what remains. We lived in a large airy (I won't say dilapidated) country house, our ancestral mansion; which partly accounted for my good looks. The red still on my cheek is natural. My mother—ahem!—was handsome before me. Our fortune was not large, though our family was; and as the one increased, the other seemed to diminish. We had been Catholics for generations, so I was sent to complete my education in France; that is, I was apprenticed to a dress-maker, not a fashionable Parisian personage—my parents thought such a place too perilous, and the premium asked might be too heavy—but a provincial artist, one Madame Dubois, a middle-aged person, many years a widow, who practised her profession in a secluded hamlet, which, however, was a central point between several large *bourgs* or market-towns. All the ladies of all the official personages, all the mayoresses, deputy-mayoresses, notaries and judges-de-peace's wives, flocked to her one after the other, as soon as there were rumours of a new fashion coming out. In short, she had more orders than she could execute. My business was sometimes to go and take them, and very often to carry them home when executed; so that I knew all the by-roads and short-cuts of the neighbourhood well. My mistress's attention was thus fully occupied; for she sedulously superintended the business herself. She was fond of money, and she earned heaps of it. With her there lived a brother, much younger than herself, a handsome unmarried man of five or six-and-twenty, who had much less to employ his time with. I will call him Monsieur Leclercq, because he was *clerc* to the parish—a position more looked up to and more important there than that of a rural parish clerk in England. He was as learned as the curé, perhaps a little more so; for he was constantly poring over books about magic, to the great annoyance of his sister, a strict devotee and zealous church-goer, who often threatened to burn them all. What most provoked her was that, being in Latin, she could form no

opinion of their contents. It was not curiosity, O dear, no! His favourite book was Albertus Magnus, with whose help he said he could do anything, even call spirits to come to his aid; at which I laughed incredulously. But one evening, about dusk, he said, "Just come and see." I followed him a few steps into the orchard behind the house. The thickly-planted trees, with their heavy-laden branches bowed down with fruit, increased the darkness. Heavy clouds were drifting low, and a young moon was on the point of setting. He drew close to me, reading ever so much out of his book. "Look! here they come," he said. "Don't utter a syllable, or they may do us serious injury." Instantly there were hovering over and around us multitudes of coal-black birds and bats, some no bigger than bluebottle flies, others of enormous spread of wing, of different form, long-legged, long-necked, hook-beaked, big-headed, fiery-eyed; screaming, hooting, hissing, buzzing, flapping; whirling round us so close that I shrank to him for protection. He never ceased reading in Latin aloud, until, hearing voices in the house, he suddenly closed the big book with a slap, and bade the summoned spirits to be gone. When I looked up, our evil-omened visitors had disappeared, the clouds had cleared away, and the stars were peeping out. He re-entered the house first. On following a few minutes afterwards, I heard Madame say, "An experiment indeed with Albertus Magnus, is it? I don't like such experiments."

"Did he not whisper a few words to you in French?"

"No, not a syllable. It was all in Latin."

"Conjugating the verb *esse*, *amare*, perhaps?"

"Possibly it might be, for aught I know. By and by, when the days grew shorter, I had to carry home a dress which had been promised for that very evening. In the course of the day, Monsieur Leclercq told me that, through his magical arts, I should be met on the way by a fine gentleman, quite a stranger, and indeed not of this world, who would offer me a diamond ring, which I was at liberty to accept or not. I pooch-pooched the thing as ridiculous, nay, impossible. That dress was complicated, with an immense quantity of trimming, and daylight had disappeared before the last touch was given to it. I started with my burden, not heavy, in a band-box. The road lay first over a bleak barren heath. Certainly I thought of the threatened meeting, and provided myself with a large smelling-bottle filled with holy water. My pulse throbbed quick. To keep up my courage, I sang aloud a ditty Leclercq had taught me. But, nothing appearing, I felt more at ease, until the road sank into a hollow, with high steep banks on either side, overtopped by pollard willow-trees. Just before emerging from this, there suddenly stood in the middle of the path a tallish man holding in his hand something that shone as if with a light of its own. Where he came from, whether he sprang up from the ground, I could not tell."

"Was there a strong smell of sulphur perceptible?"

"No; it was more like camellia cologne."

"Who was he like?"

"Well, he was something like M. Leclercq, only taller; and instead of being close-shaved, like him, he had a beautiful black moustache and beard."

"How was he dressed?"

"As a perfect gentleman, but with singularly long trousers, so that I could not see his feet."

"To hide his cloven foot—or perhaps the patten that are worn by men in the north of France. But what did you do? Run away, I suppose?"

"I was so fluttered that I have not the slightest idea. It passed like a nightmare or a dream. After sprinkling him with holy water and making the sign of the cross, I believe I fainted. My handbox fell one way and I another. On recovering, I found it on the grassy bank without the slightest dirt or injury. The dark gentleman had vanished without leaving a trace, but on my finger was this diamond ring. Next day, Leclercq took an opportunity to ask me, smiling, whether I now believed in the power of magic, and whether I knew whom I had met last night. I told him I had not the least idea. "Well," he said, this time looking serious, "it was the devil himself, whom I invoked and sent by the help of Albertus Magnus." "Albertus Magnus gain?" said Madame, furious, for she just caught the last few words. "I'll soon put a stop to that for the future." And seizing the book, without his daring to resist, she stuck it into the very midst of the fire, and did not leave till it was completely consumed."

"What became of your friend, the clever magician?"

"His sister married him to one of her clients, a millionaire old maid. He resisted for a while; but she threatened to turn him out of her house, and that he never should have a centime of her money. As he had nothing but his small clerk's salary, that argument was irresistible. Soon after the banus were published (which in France is compulsory on high and low), I returned to England, and don't know how they got on together. Perhaps I was in too great a hurry. As to the ring, I kept it; but, you may be sure, out of madam's sight. Nor would I ever consent to part with it, not even when, I may now confess, I should have been exceedingly glad of what it would fetch."

"False stones, doubtless," I whispered to Emily. "They make admirable paste jewellery now a-days."

"I don't know," she answered; "I believe them real. Persons in her position have a na-

tural pride in preserving relics and proofs of their former prosperity."

"Besides," continued Mrs. Fitzplantagenet, "you know that a diamond brings good luck. You smile that, I, a Lady help, should say so. I do say so deliberately. Here I have every comfort, with employment enough to drive off melancholy thoughts. Here while willing to work for my bread, I am treated and spoken to like a fellow-creature. No, no; wherever it comes from, I will never part from my diamond ring, until I leave it on my deathbed to some one who has been kind to me."

After a pause, occasioned by the Lady Help's earnestness, cousin Emily, with a knowing twinkle in her eyes broke in.

"I believe in ghosts, for the best of all reasons, because I have been a ghost myself. It was my first introduction to our country member, Sir Simon Strickthorne, a nice gentlemanly man, though a little cold and precise until you know him well; but at that time he was expecting to enter the ministry of which he is now, as the papers say, a distinguished ornament. He was to sleep at our house in the course of an electioneering visit to his constituents, and my excellent husband John had driven over after dinner to fetch him from the town where he had been canvassing all day. Knowing how tired he could not help being, our party at home consisted only of a very few and intimate friends. While we were awaiting their arrival, one of our men came back with a note informing us that Sir Simon could not reach us until tomorrow next day, but that John would return immediately in the carriage alone. Some one, I forget who, said, "Let us give him a surprise. Suppose we all dress up, and assume the characters of an assemblage of ghosts." The idea was too bright not to be adopted at once. Within ten minutes everybody was robed in a sheet; gowns and head-dresses were improvised; mourning gloves were tried and approved. We were more ghostly, though less subjective, than Robert the Devil's resuscitated nurse. Some of us carried low, to represent hideous misshapen dwarfs; others mounted on chairs and stools, acquiring thereby gigantic stature; others were contented with their natural height; and the sheets willingly lent themselves to every modification of form and figure."

"Hark! What noise was that?" asked Mademoiselle Honorine. "Didn't I hear the sound of horse's feet?"

"Nobody would come here on horseback such a night as this, unless the Phantom Huntsman chose to pay us a visit. Where was I? Oh, in the middle of the room was placed on a table a large dish containing warm rum mixed with salt. The *tableau vivant* thus prepared, the rehearsal of our parts began. It was soon cut short by the sound of the carriage, which stopped at the door. "What capital fun to frighten John!" He little thinks his house is haunted. Put out all the lights. Set fire to the rum to give us 'pale faces.' He is walking across the entrance-hall. He is at the door. Quick! Begin!" And we did begin slow guttural, idiotic sayings to and fro, unintelligible mutterings, plaintive wailings, on all which the central flame cast its flickering light."

"A noise again! I am sure I heard a stealthy footstep and the sound of some door opening and shutting."

"Nonsense! it was the wind amongst the branches outside the house. Our trick really was a well got-up spectacle, worthy of more complete success. The handle of the drawing-room door was turned; then the door opened, and we could hear John in the hall, saying, "Step in, Sir Simon, without ceremony. I will follow you in a moment. I am sure my wife will be delighted to find that, after all, you have come to-night." Sir Simon did step in; and I can see at this moment his look of bewilderment converted into horror by the glare of the pallid flickering flames. "What's all this?" said John half angrily, the instant he entered. "A masquerade! for my benefit exclusively, be assured, Sir Simon." It took a full minute to give explanations and obtain forgiveness, and another minute to stamp their sincerity by general indulgence in a hearty laugh. But John is such a good-hearted fellow! I do so love him, and I don't mind saying so. He will be here with us to-morrow, if all goes well, and right glad shall I be."

"His ghost is here to-night said a deep hollow voice, behind the curtains."

"There!" ejaculated Mrs. Fitzplantagenet hysterically. "Up there! A spectral head! Something, I am sure, is going to happen."

Everybody started in surprise and alarm, with looks directed to the spot whence the sound came. Soon the curtains slowly opened, and, at an elevation overtopping human stature, a face, obscured in shadow, was seen.

"A—h!" screamed Emily, with a pretty little shriek more indicative of satisfaction than of fright. "Ah! Why, 'tis John himself! Please to come down at once, sir, for nobody will ever be afraid of you."

"Something is going to happen!" repeated John, in the same sepulchral tones, before obeying the summons. "This happens, Mrs. Fitzplantagenet," he said, while presenting himself in solid and unghostly flesh and blood. "First, I give my wife a hearty kiss; secondly, as my journey has been cold and wet, I will thankfully accept a hot cup of tea supplemented with a slice of meat; and lastly, you can no more say that listeners never hear any good of themselves."