

A STRANGE CHRISTMAS DINNER.

HOW it happened I know not, but here it was: The great round dome, with its high reaching walls, and the massive beams and marble arches; crimson drapings from pillar and niche; the gleam of a thousand tapers, and mirrored glow from silver plate and burnished brass. Far overhead there swayed and rustled streamers of blue and white, twined and interwoven into mystic characters among the rafters. Under foot lay soft tapestries. The tables shone with their pure, white linen amid luxuriant gardens of palms. Beside the entrance there were climbing roses odorous of June, and, amid the candelabra, the holly sprays gleamed, bright red and waxen green, most significant of all. Now and then a perfumed breath from the eastern wall would sweep softly over the tables, and mingle with the scent of the flowers.

Yet all was still. Outside one could hear the wild wintry wind whistling around the old gray buttresses, and the pines creaking and moaning by the wall. The snow was piling high into the corners, and rifling and sweeping over the great lawns, like whited ghosts at play in the chill moonlight. You could tell it all from that cry of the wind. There were cloud shadows over the snow fields too, and glittering, sparkling frost on the dark round panes. But who can linger long on the cold outside winter, when the iron door in the drapings beneath the eastern columns swings ajar, and the moving and hurrying of a crowd of workers is visible down a long avenue of iron shelves, whereon are piled, deep and high, dish after dish, and viand upon viand. The strong, warm air of the royal kitchen rushes into the banquet-hall for a moment, and from its breath you can picture the great ovens, and the gigantic fires with their fantastic flickering and wild-roaring revels beneath kettle and range.

Impelled by an irresistible impulse, I went over to the door and slipped into the room. The extent of the place and the number of servants so busily at work dazed and bewildered me; but, as I edged off toward the wall, I noticed that no one paid any attention to me so long as I walked down the long rows without touching either side. Against such action numerous notices warned. But what a sight! The shelves were adjusted into iron frames, and according to their location were loaded with the different dishes, which kept multiplying as the lifts swung up now and then, filled with freshly baked or moulded pastry. Surely it must be some storehouse of the gods. What could it mean?

I must have lingered looking at the busy scene much longer than it seemed, for, when I turned to go, I noticed that a change had taken place, that waiters in strange costumes were hurrying in and out, carrying their great balanced trays, and that there was the sound of revellers without. Coming through the door, I was startled to see the long rounding tables all filled with guests. Everywhere there were strange faces, there was laughing and gay talking, there were smiles and glances. Overhead the orchestral music came faintly from some hidden gallery among the rafters. Wondering more than ever, I let my eyes wander over the assemblage. Here was the climax of bewilderment! Where had they gathered from? There were old patriarchs dressed as from the Orient, stately old men in the Greek or Roman toga, cowed monks, and long-bearded scholars with the mediæval gown and crimson hood. Here and there a woman of a later day was conspicuous by the bright circle of admiring faces and the quick flashes of wit among those at her side.

I happened to glance at the venerable, hoary old Grecian who sat beneath the dais at the end of the central table. I thought I had seen the picture of his face, but could not exactly recall where. Suddenly I remembered. It was Homer! There he sat in the majesty of his greatness; the light of a smile would steal now and then across

his massive face, and kindly twinkles were in his eyes, but the king-like poise of his head, and the long-flowing locks thrown back with the Grecian grace bespoke at once the master-soul of the ancient bard. Swiftly my eye ran down the table. Milton, Cicero, Horace, Virgil, Dante, Demosthenes, all the great, the classics of our race! Yonder sat the austere stoic with his stony eyes still fixed against the alluring passion, here were the revellers of France, and the dark-browed German philosophers, there were the mathematicians of Arabia, and of Cambridge, the alchemist of the past, and the scientist of the present. I was turning from table to table and from face to face, astonished and amazed, when suddenly a hush fell over all, and looking back, I saw that Homer had arisen.

"Fellow-Immortals," he began—already I thought I could hear the deep swell and ocean cadence of his recitative. "Methinks to-night the gray-eyed Athene has brought us comfort, speeding over the singing breezes. Surely in the unmolested seclusion of our dome-formed dwelling, when, on all world-borders of the wine-dark sea there is feasting to-night in the homes of men, we may rejoice unseem of mortals. Strange has our fate been, to slumber in silence while the fleet-footed seasons pass and bring the years, or be torn from our rest at the wild-veering whim of the student. We of the song and the story suffer severest. But away with complaint! On this Christmas night of the year, at these tables where we are abused, unable to answer, in this dome, dim day-lighted, we feast—we the Immortals! As Zeus of the voice far-borne, transforming the dull room of study into this banquet-hall"—I heard no more. A sudden thought flashed through my brain. Could it be—surely it must be—the old library! This was the place where we had spent so many hours of study, where we had idled away so many flying moments, and yonder the magnificent, the sombre, the wonderful book-room, where those sixty thousand silent voices of the great were prisoned in their ponderous shelves, where the presence of the classic past and the glimpse into the stupendous works of men weighed on the pensive mind till it became awe-stricken in the silent place! This—this was a kitchen!

Busied with many reveries, I roused myself in time to hear the words of the toast—"The health of those who harm us little, disturbing us seldom—the undergraduates of Toronto University!" The enthusiasm with which that toast was drunk was unparalleled in college history. Virgil was especially hilarious, shouting that since the change in the curriculum he had been disturbed but once. But I cannot delay with any description of the scenes that followed; how Demosthenes and Cicero replied with all the old-time fire. Among the revellers I wandered back and forth, gazing at one and another, until my head fairly reeled with exhaustion. At last a gray beam stole in at the eastern window. Homer looked at his watch, rose and took his way to the iron door. I followed, eager to see the last.

When we opened the draperies, behold, all was dark! The shelves had been emptied of their dishes; the room was still! Walking carefully over to the farthest corner, he stopped at a certain row, examined the section, and then deliberately drew himself up to the top shelf, and sat down. Almost instantly in the deep shade I saw his silver hair sweep down like a cloud over him, the dark sleeves of his toga became hard and straight; a little convulsive shudder and all was still. I went over and touched him,—it was only a book! Hurrying out to the main passageway, I saw the long procession coming with solemn steps down the aisle, turning each to his place, and clambering up to his shelf. When the morning light stole in, it gleamed along the silent, ponderous rows of the book-room. All was as before. I came out to the study; there were only the long bare tables, the chairs undisturbed, and the white walls.

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