CHARLES DICKENS.

CHRISTMAS, 1870.

Ring out, O Bells, for merry, merry Christmas,
Down through the crowded street;
Let all the city chimes in pealing chorus
The Gloria repeat;
And sounding onward over hill and valley
Buried beneath the snow,
Let village spires take up the joyful story,
Echoing to and fro.

Bring in the evergreens, wreathe shining holly
With odorous dark pine,
Festoon the dim Cathedral's Gothic arches,
The glittering organ twine;
Gather together round the glowing fireside,
The old, the grave, the gay,
And sing in carols how the holy Christ-Child
Was born on Christmas-day.

But 'midst the chimes from cross-crowned steeples ringing,
The Christmas garlands green,
The children's voices joyous carols singing,
The merry household scene,
Forget not one who told the Christmas story
With matchless loving art,
"Peace and good-will to men," with tender glory
Filling his kindly heart.

Forget not one who hailed the Christmas season
In childlike faith and joy,
Sharing the festal songs and merry frolics,
A laughing, gray-haired boy;
Forget not one who yearly gave us legends
Through the long, happy past,
Each one exhaling spicy Christmas perfumes
More fragrant than the last.

The kindly heart is still; the voice is silent;
No more we wait to hear
The magic accents of the Great Enchanter,
The story-teller dear;
But from the stormy shore of dark Atlantic
To fair Pacific's wave
Thousands of hearts will send a Christmas blessing
To rest on Dickens' grave.

JEANETTE'S CHRISTMAS.

THE Christmas of 1868 dawned somewhat gloomily for Jeanette Derwent. A great fire had, only a week before, swept away all of the property upon the rent of which she and her aunt Hannah had, with careful management, been content to live. Where should they turn now for support? Jeanette's two hands, or her stronger head, were the only visible means, for blind Aunt Hannah had not lifted a finger these four years.

There was no odor of Christmas pies, of six-hour puddings, of savory tid-bits, about their cottage kitchen. No stocking hung from the mantel, no Christmas-tree glorified the evening. It was bitter weather besides; the frost grew and grew on the pane in the broad sunlight, or maybe it was because the fire was so low, and the cottage so old and full of draughts, which made the weather seem more severe; and then, when the heart is chilled by the frosts of fortune, the body shivers in sympathy. Last night, sitting in the dark, Jeanette had watched a fairy tree spring up across the way, and blossom in a hundred fairy gifts, amidst lights, and music, and laughing eyes, and light hearts, and scores of good wishes. And then she had recalled the All-Halloween when she baked a little cake, putting into it a thimble, a piece of money, and a ring, and divided it among a few friends who had dropped in, one of whom was Cyrus Gilbert. What a laugh they had had when Nell Hood, who had just run over to show Jeanette her engagement-ring, found the thimble, which foretold a single life, in her portion! And how pleased she herself and been when the money—only a three-cent bit which Cyrus had given her for the purpose, and which she had now somewhere among her treasures—came to her share, and prophesied wealth! She had almost believed it then. And when the ring fell to Cyrus, and he quietly slipped it upon her finger, saying, "My fortune is yours, Jean; if I am to be married, so are you," was there a happier girl in all Elmsford?

"Did he really mean it?" she asked herself, when he had gone away to sea without saying any thing more definite. Or was it only the way of young men, to speak and forget? It was hardly the way of Cyrus, at least. It was true, she had taken the ring off her finger, and had sent it to him the week before he left. If *that* was all he intended to give her, she wanted nothing of his giving. She could buy rings for herself upon a pinch. Yet perhaps he had not relished the reply she had made him on that All-Halloween, more from awkwardness than any thing else, when she had said,

"If you are to be married, Sir, *I* am to be rich!"

"Do you think so much of riches, Jean?" he asked. "Do you value money beyond any thing? *I* would rather be poor Tom Homespun, with a wife to love me, and work to keep me out of mischief, than old Squire Ducats, who has no nearer tie than his cravat—who lives in clover, and wears purple and fine linen, and yawns over his wines, and longs for he doesn't know what."

"I don't know," Jeanette had said. "They say that when poverty comes in at the door, love flies out at the window. I'm afraid that this saying is the hoarded experience of the world, disagreeable as it is. Love, you know, is the most delicate of all plants; it must be hedged about with favorable circumstances; when one has to fight for bread-and-butter there is no leisure left for its observances, and it starves to death. Or so our School Reader used to tell us."

"I think," replied Cyrus, "that, in spite of the Reader, one day you will acknowledge it to be the hardiest plant alive. Why, Jean, it survives every thing. It is the motive power of the universe; it sustains the stars in their courses; it hopeth all things, endureth all things; it never fails!"

"Dear me, how earnest you are getting! One would think you were already an atom of this great motive power."

"I *am* in earnest," he had said; and there the matter rested, or would have rested, only that nothing ever does rest, since every thing moves on to larger results.

Well, you see, on this particular Christmas Jeanette had little to look forward to but hard work and buffetings with fortune. Already the flour was beginning to ebb visibly, the coal growing beautifully less; the last pat of butter she had saved for to-day's dinner—to garnish the holiday's feast, could it be called? Their wardrobe would last them some time yet; they had still a humble roof over their heads, if it did leak, and that was all. Jeanette was asking herself, for the hundredth time or more, "What can I do?" without receiving any definite answer, when the gate clicked and turned on its lazy hinges, and a bold hand pulled at the knocker on the front-door. Perhaps here was the answer—perhaps; who knew? Perhaps it was Cyrus! What a Christmas it would be, after all her reverses! She completed an entire castle in the air—turrets and pointed ceilings and gold-embroidered arras, portcullis and all—in the time between leaving her mending and passing through the little hall to the street door, and there she paused to catch her breath, and to be thrilled with the wraith of happiness one blessed instant before confronting reality in the person of a gray-bearded gentleman, who put out a hand cordially, and said,

"A merry Christmas, Miss Jeanette."

"Thanks, and a merry Christmas to you, Mr. Ducats," said Jeanette, trembling in the draught; for the breath of the cold Christmas weather, or something else, had struck a sudden chill to her very marrow. "Will you come in and see Aunt Hannah, Sir?"

"I came to see *you* this morning, Jeanette—I came to bring you a Christmas gift, if you will be so good as to accept of it."

"A gift for me? Thank you! How very kind!"

"Wait a little, Jeanette. When you know what it is, you may not think so favorably of the gift. I came to offer you myself, with all my worldly goods, gray hairs and wrinkles thrown in, as a Christmas gift."

"Oh! oh!" cried Jeanette, putting out her hands as if she would repulse him.

"There, there, I was afraid you'd despise it. But it's for your good. Here am I, running over with money, and you—not a cent to your name. How can you do better than to share my plenty with me—you and Aunt Hannah? Don't think it's a matter of charity, child. I've thought of it this long while; and when that young simpleton, Cyrus Gilbert, left you in the lurch, I made up my mind that I'd fill the gap if you'd let me; and here I am!"

"I—thank—you," gasped Jeanette, "but—"

"So you said before," dryly observed the Squire.

"Jean! Jean!" called Aunt Hannah, turning her blind eyes, like a reproach, upon her, "don't throw away such a good chance without a reason. You may never have such another. As for Cyrus Gilbert, I never had much opinion of the fellow; I was always afraid you'd take to him."

"But, Aunt Hannah, I—I—how am I to answer? What shall I say to him?"—appealing rather to herself than to her aunt.

"Say yes, Jean."

"Say yes, Jean," repeated Squire Ducats. "See, I'm an old man; I sha'n't last long; and then you'll be a gay young widow, with every thing at your command. And it's better to be an old man's darling than a young man's slave, any body would say. Cyrus Gilbert's no fool," taking his cue, "but he's good for nothing as a lover, and poor as a church-mouse, besides. Come! think better of it, and accept my Christmas gift."

"I can't—I must think about it. I—"

"That's just what I want you to do. Think about it as long as you please."

"And the more you think, the more you'll *be* pleased," said Aunt Hannah, speaking from her own point of view.

"Yes, think from now till next Christmas, if you will; only if you *could* come to a decision sooner I should feel flattered, especially as I'm such an old gray-beard, likely to drop off at any time, you know."

The day seemed to grow colder and more hopeless than before after this. Jeanette felt nipped to the heart's core. She kept the tears out of her eyes with a strong effort while her aunt suggested a thousand reasons why she should favor the Squire's suit.

"You will be as good as any body, when you are Madame Ducats, with servants at your beck and call, and plate two or three hundred years old on your table."

"I should be no better than I am now," sighed Jeanette, "if, indeed, so good."

"Leastways, folks would notice you more. You would be asked to visit all the grandees of Elmsford, and you'd be a little grander than any of them. They'd suddenly remember that you were descended from the Derwents of Derwentwater."

"I don't care what they remember nor what they forget." If she could only know what Cyrus forgot or remembered it would signify a thousand times more to her.

"I dare say, now, you're putting the Squire off along of hoping Cyrus Gilbert'll put in a claim some fine day. I'd have more grit if I was a girl than to be hankering after a fellow who wouldn't give his old shoes for me. It's real mean-spirited of you, and we half starved at that!"

"I can work," said Jean.

"And a heap of money you'll make, when we might be living on the fat of the land—when you might wrap yourself in your ermine, like as we saw young Madame Goldsworth to-day, your hands all ablaze with diamonds," for what Aunt Hannah saw through Jean's eyes was very real to her. "Christmas holidays what feasting we might have, what trees, like the one you saw over the way, only more so; what Twelfth-night cakes, and bands of music, and lights enough for a tavern; and the coal wouldn't be everlastingly getting out, and the cupboard would be like a king's pantry!"

"I dare say! I dare say!" cried Jeanette, aware that this sort of castle-building pleased her poor aunt, while it harrowed her own soul, and suggested a hundred doubts and misgivings. What if it were her bounden duty to forget Cyrus Gilbert and to marry Squire Ducats? What if, eventually, she should be forced to forget him? what if he deserved it, and after long years of waiting and foregoing much she should come to know that he deserved it? What if he should come home some day, bringing a foreign bride, would it not better please her own pride that he should see she had not worn the willow for him, but knew how to bear her new honors with dignity as well as with pleasure? But, after all, if he loved her, if he were toiling for her! If he were to return poor, or sick, or in trouble, and she from the height of her grandeur could not stoop to wet his lips, to minister to his sorest need! And yet, how fine a thing it might be to queen it at Ducats Place—for poor Jeanette, like the rest of us, was not above some petty ambitions; she had been there once long ago on an errand, and it had seemed like treading on beds of flowers to move about the long rooms where the genius of luxury had folded its wings. To be sure, she had been half frightened by the throng of dead-and-gone Ducatses, whose canvas images frowned down upon her from the walls of the broad hall—for the Ducats frown was supposed to be as potent as the evil-eye, and something which no one cared to provoke. She recalled the glitter of the sun in the old-fashioned family plate on the side-board, with its ornaments of winged griffins. She remembered, too, as a sort of forerunner, how she had caught a glimpse of herself in the great mirror that lined one side of the drawing-room, and had swept a courtesy to the little, wan apparition, mistaking it for the lady of the house. There were paintings by the old masters illuminating the place, which dead and dusty Ducatses had brought home from their travels—from taking their pleasure under the sun; there were sculptured faces, beautiful as angels, confronting you unawares; there were beds hung with silken tapestry, there were dark corridors fit for ghosts to walk in, and unexpected staircases winding away into darkness, and secret closets, and panels in the wainscot that were only doors in disguise—enough to take the imagination of any girl. And there was the courting-room, where generations of Ducatses had repeated or learned the old, old story, time out of mind, till it seemed as if the painted seraphs on the ceiling were bending down to listen, and setting it to celestial music. It was surely all very fine, and it might all be her own; she might be first in her native place, "the leader of the *ton*," "the cynosure of neighboring eyes." One magic word would complete the transformation.

But from how much that was sweet would that one word shut her out! From all the costly toils and triumphs of love, from the joys of two hearts made happy, and the repose of a conscience void of offense. And yet it was hard to choose; for herself, she could make shift to do without the milk and honey of the promised land. As much as she cared for these things, she cared for love more. She could go shabbily dressed, she could fare plainly, and endure weariness and even pain, if need be; but her heart must be at peace with itself, not torturing her with bitter upbraidings. If she were to resign now and forever the hope of loving and being loved as she could wish, for this gilded shadow of happiness, she felt that she should lose all vital force and purpose to contend against the flesh and the devil, and the pomps and vanities of this wicked world. She should become of the earth, earthy; beguiled by no sweet illusions, capable of no tender charities, cheated into no inconsistencies. But, selfish still, she was considering no one else. Should her aunt, stricken with blindness and poverty, should she be left waiting unsatisfied at the feast of life, looking forward to nothing but the same round of self-denial and suffering, when a word of Jeanette's could lift her above it into a region of plenty? When she could give eyes to the blind, and strength to feeble limbs, and comfort to old age, ought she to hesitate?

Day by day of the new year Jeanette turned these thoughts over in her mind, scanning them closely, holding them up to the light of reason, so that she might detect flaw or failing, and still she came no nearer to a judgment of the case. Whichever way she turned there was a stumbling-block in the path. It was a sin to marry without love; it was a sin to forget one's sweetheart without a cause; it was a sin to allow her poor blind aunt to suffer when she could save. Which sin was greatest, or whether they were equal in sinfulness, was the question which employed her thoughts, and involved her in a thousand controversies, in which, by turns, she defended all sides. In the mean time her hands were as busy as her head; whatever she found to do she did with all her might; but, as Aunt Hannah had predicted, the result was not in proportion to the effort. Something seemed to hinder her at every turn. By-and-by needle-work fell off; people seemed dissatisfied with her stitches; refused to pay any thing but starvation prices. Then she sat at home a while, and worked wonderful devices upon linen and cashmere, and offered them for sale.

"They are too fine for us," cried the little public of Elmsford; "I wonder you should have thought that we could afford such things!" And so the time and material were lost to Jeanette, and nothing gained but cold experience; and though experience is a good guide, she is a poor provider. As for the great world beyond Elmsford, Jeanette had no relations with it which could furnish a step toward another market for her goods; and the cost of a journey thither, together with the uncertainty attaching to her profits, made the odds too great for her to dream of fighting against.

Then she bethought her of a long disused talent for music, and went about seeking pupils; and when this failed, as fail it did, she opened a small private school for children; but after the first term, quietly as the leaves drop in the forest, so her small scholars dropped away from her teaching—a process as gradual as that of nature. Nothing to which she put her hand seemed to prosper. Fortune plainly designed that she should come to reign over the house of Ducats in spite of herself. She began to be careless as to the event. She had tried every thing that her circumstances permitted, for she had no capital with which to enter business; nobody wanted her behind a counter in Elmsford; and if it came to going out as nursery governess or house-maid, how could she leave Aunt Hannah? In the early half of the year she had said that she would sooner sweep the streets than marry Squire Ducats; but the revenues of a street-sweeper in Elmsford would not have supplied her with salt. It was all very well for people to talk about the dignity of labor, to declare that willing hands never went begging, that the world was full of work, and the workers scarce; but she had disproved it all. Jeanette did not guess that it was not Fate but Squire Ducats who defeated her plans, robbed her of employment, imposed idleness and starvation upon her, in order to have his way, and lap her in luxury at last—Squire Ducats, the autocrat of Elmsford, whose money and influence could buy whoever had a price.

One evening toward the latter part of November an old neighbor, just home from a long sea voyage, dropped into Jeanette's cottage to chat with Aunt Hannah; and in the way of conversation,

"I saw Cyrus Gilbert in London," said he. "You and him used to be thick, didn't you, Jean?"

"He is a friend of mine," returned Jeanette.

"Eh? Putty smart fellow, Cy is. The gal that gits him better thank her stars. I asked him if he was married yet; and, 'Not yet, Cap'n Jack,' says he; 'but I mean to be by this time next year, if we're both alive and *she's* willing.' 'Worth any thing, eh, Cy?' says I. 'She's worth more'n any woman in Elmsford, Cap'n Jack,' says he. 'Good,' says I; 'then she'll be able to gin you a helping hand.' 'Yes,' says he, blushing up like a boy, 'she's gin me a helping hand often and again.' Now, you see, I didn't quite like to ask her name right out, though I felt round, you know; but I was a-thinking as how you and him used to be so neighborly, you'd be like to know who it is Cy's going for!"

Jeanette's hands, that were putting the tea-kettle on the fire, shook like the palsy; the blood was burning and deserting her cheeks by turns. Was it for this she had waited? What a fool she had been to nurse the thought of him day by day, when he had chosen to forget her! She might have known that there was no constancy in man; didn't all the novels and poems say so? And could any thing but a universal fact find such large acceptance with the public?

Well, he should never know that she had remembered him; there was comfort in that. She could forget as well as he.

"I can't tell, I'm sure, Captain Sands," she answered, in such a matter-of-fact voice that even blind Aunt Hannah was deceived. "You know it is a matter of three years since we met. Most likely it is some one he has found in his travels."

"Just so. He's rich enough now to retire on his money if he chooses. He's been mighty lucky. Gilbert-luck I call it. I was thinking, before he left, as how you and him looked like making a match some day, eh?"

"Folderol!" said Aunt Hannah from her corner, where she heard every thing, if she saw nothing.

"I joked him about it there, in London, too. Says I, 'Where's the gal you left behind you?'"

"What did he say?" asked Jeanette, smiling so sweetly that you would have thought it the best joke in the world.

"'Who's that?' says he. 'Jeanette Derwent,' says I. 'Oh! Jeanette,' says he; 'it's three years since I saw her. Don't you think it would be a pretty constant fellow to remember a gal all that time—and he a sailor, too?' Now I dare say if he'd been a landsman 'twould hev been different, Jean."

"Perhaps," said Jeanette, smothering a sigh with a laugh.

"You're mighty indifferent about it, any how," grinned the Captain.

"Why shouldn't I be? I'm going to be married myself, come Christmas-day," in the same still manner.

"You! You've been mighty sly about it, Jean. Who's the chap?"

"Well, I don't know as you could hardly call him 'a chap' at his years," laughed Jean. "I am going to marry Squire Ducats."

"Hurrah! You're stepping into a fortune, Jean. I don't need to wish you good luck."

"Oh yes; but I am not marrying for money, Captain."

"No? That's the best part of it! I don't see why an old man shouldn't be loved as well as a young fool. I'm an old man myself, but Peggy's just as spooney on me as when the honeymoon was in its first quarter. So you are marrying for love, eh?"

"Yes, I am marrying for love."

Was that a lie? Was she not going to marry Squire Ducats because Cyrus, whom she loved, would soon return with a wife? If she did not