

CHRISTMAS IN FICTION.

By GEORGE H. PICARD

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IRVING.

NOT until the first half of the last century was well spent did the species of literature which has come to be known as Christmas fiction effect a permanent lodgment in the hearts of English speaking mankind. The ancient parable plays and the rhymed holiday legends of the middle ages are still in use on the continent, but the more secular minded English had only the rude Yuletide jingles and the quaint carols of beef eating antiquity.

Contrary to the prevailing notion, the inventor of the tale with a distinctively Christmas flavor was an American. It is likely that it would occur to few Americans and to no Englishman to dissent if it were asserted in their presence that Charles Dickens originated the Christmas story. His name is so inseparably connected with so much of the holiday literature enshrined in the popular heart that it is small wonder the mention of Christmas suggests him. The credit of the "literary find," however, must be given to another, a man who was at the end of his thirties when Dickens was born, who had been at Malta when Nelson's fleet sailed away to Trafalgar, who had visited Sir Walter at Abbotsford and had captivated him and who was afterward secretary to the United States legation in England. That, of course, means Washington Irving.

Irving's first book, "The Sketch-Book of Geoffrey Crayon, Gent.," had pleased everybody, so much so, indeed, that it was republished by John Murray in London and translated into several continental languages. Both the publishers and the public were urging him to do something equally meritorious. Nobody realized more keenly than did the author of the exquisite work the difficulty of producing its mate, and he was not a man to be driven into mediocrity. Three years later he published "Bracebridge Hall," and the chapter of that masterpiece of literary workmanship entitled "Christmas at Bracebridge Hall" was the pioneer holiday tale of English literature and has furnished a model for subsequent fictionists which has seldom been equaled and never excelled. Its easy grace and felicity of expression were a revelation to everybody in those days, and the wonder and the charm are potent still.

William Makepeace Thackeray, master of a realism that is the wonder and the despair of those who have followed him, needed no model and chose none. His "Mrs. Perkins' Ball" resembles nothing ever conceived in the mind of any other man. The public was pleased with it, but never so much as was Thackeray himself.

Most amazing of all, the author of the tale professed to believe that it was "Mrs. Perkins' Ball" that had made his reputation—that, too, in the face of the fact that "Vanity Fair" had just been published. This perversion of Thackeray in regard to the literary value of his wares and his lack of faith in his masterpiece—had so little confidence in the success of "Vanity Fair" that after it appeared he applied for a small government position—proof sufficient that the man who creates a masterpiece may have a dim conception of artistic values.

All the makers of great fiction are more or less under the spell of their immediate surroundings, but few have made it more apparent than Charles Dickens. Those who knew the circumstances saw plainly that he had put himself and his sad childhood into many of his pathetic short stories. This is especially true of "The Ghost in Master B.'s Room," which is an account of things which happened to him in his troubled boyhood. As a child he was a firm believer in ghosts, and it is probable that he never entirely abandoned his faith in spectral appearances. Many of his tales are peopled with disembodied spirits, and they are like the ghosts of no other writer. They are the spooks that appeal to one and make one believe in their genuineness. They are frequently more real than the living characters who consort with them. Although they are dead, they conduct themselves like living entities.

Dickens' Christmas ghosts are unique in the realm of literature. Of all the silent shapes that have been summoned from the upper and nether worlds to lend enchantment to the Christmas tale his alone have become acclimated. There is never anything repulsive about them. They are the most companionable spooks ever invented. They are seldom sepulchral, but are frequently cheerful. They are not the haunting, sleep killing and never to be exorcised phantoms of the fairy tales, but actual personalities, freed from all

mortal restrictions in regard to locomotion that come to us when we bid them and vanish politely when we are weary of their presence.

Bret Harte never made a secret of his admiration for the creator of Little Nell and Tom Pinch. Like Paul at the feet of Gamaliel, he was content to receive his lesson from the man he acknowledged to be his master. Not until after Dickens had finished his work did the young literary light who stood revealed in the far western firmament learn that his model had seen that exquisite elegy "Dickens in Camp" and had been heard to express his admiration of it in the most generous terms. The dying novelist declared that the work of the new American writer contained such subtle strokes of workmanship as no other writer in the language had yet exhibited. And then he asked, with a humorous gleam in his weary eyes, "Don't you think that his manner is very like my own?"

Like Dickens, Harte had a genuine fondness for the doings of Yuletide. One who knew him best says that up to the last day of his life "he thought much of the Christmas season and to the last kept up the fond and foolish custom of sending generous presents to his friends." Better appreciated in England than in his native country, Harte spent the later years of his life abroad, but his stories were to the last distinctively American. In that admirable performance entitled "How Santa Claus Came to Simpson's Bar" there is no flavor of the old world Christmas, and Johnny, clothed in the stars and stripes, is a young American of the most unmistakable sort.

Two of the most strikingly dissimilar Christmas stories ever written are Hawthorne's "Christmas Banquet" and Miss Mitford's "Christmas Party." There is little of Christmas in Hawthorne's gruesome tale. The joyous festival is only a literary makeshift around which is woven a weird

psychological study that drives all remembrance of the blessed season from the mind. Its ghosts are not the sociable and easily banished spooks of Dickens. They are formless and creepy and all pervading. They are the fearsome specters that rise in the frigid vapors of German mysticism, and they are made icier still with a strong admixture of New England transcendentalism. It is a masterpiece in conception and in treatment—no question at all about that—but it does not make the Yule log glow more brightly or lend a better flavor to the steaming bowl.

Mary Russell Mitford does not deal in ghosts. All of her Christmas char-

acters are flesh and blood people, and they are not of the sort that "will not stay dead when they die." Her "Christmas Party" is as dainty in its workmanship as anything which ever came from her careful pen, and that is saying much. It is as restful and non-suggestive as a pastoral, and its influence is as soothing as the delicate savor which escapes when the cover of a potpourri jar is lifted or the drawer of an old time cabinet is opened—the faint, pervasive odor of crushed rose leaves and dried lavender.

THE RATIONAL CHRISTMAS.

By ELLIS FRAME

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"Let us give in reason this year," she suggested.

"Not merely for the sake of giving things."

Let us, therefore, turn from foolish squanderings.

Let the gifts we give be things that may be needed.

Instead of trash soon to be cast aside."

"My darling, your suggestion shall be heeded."

For there is wisdom in it," he replied.

She did her shopping early, being guided by lessons learned from much experience.

She would show her lord and master, she decided.

How excellent a thing was common sense.

For their baby boy she purchased a French corset.

And an oriental rug that caught her eye.

"Though the darling longed to have a rocking horse, it wasn't sensible," she murmured, with a sigh.

They had promised not to buy things for each other.

They would merely get a few things for the child.

She would sacrifice her sister and her mother.

And it gladdened her to see the way he smiled.

As he said his people, too, should be omitted.

So the wise and winsome woman, day by day.

From shop to shop, with sweet emotion, fitted.

Having dry goods bound up and sent away.

He bought a pipe and splendid smoking jacket.

To give their darling glee on Christmas morn.

With these the child could make no such a racket.

As might have been produced with drum and horn.

He also got the works, unexpurgated.

Of old Boccaccio and Rabelais.

So that their little one might be stated.

And long have glad remembrance of the day.

On Christmas when their presents were displayed.

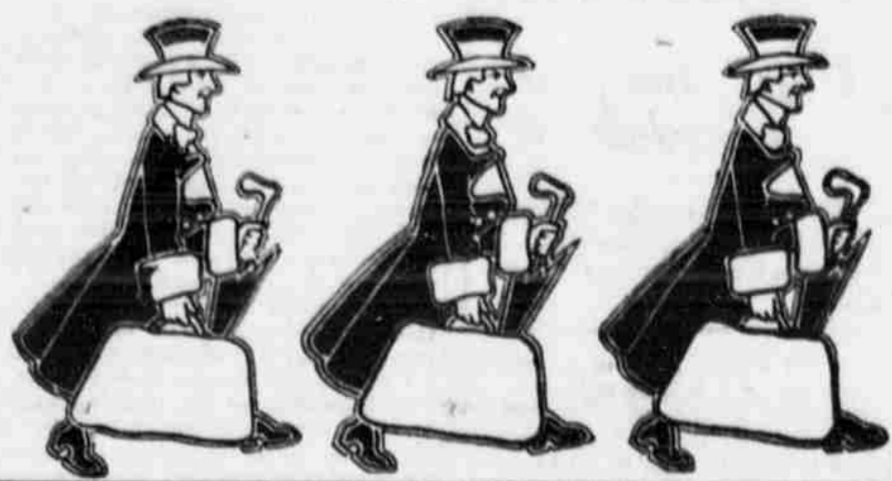
They sat upon the sofa side by side,

And while their child looked up at them, dismayed.

He had a culprit's manner, and she cried.

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A Merry Christmas



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They Packed Their Grips

WITH EVERYTHING THAT WAS NICE FOR

CHRISTMAS, NEW YEARS, and the WEDDINGS

THEN THEY WENT ON THEIR WAY REJOICING. YOU WOULD BE SURPRISED TO SEE WHAT AN ASSORTMENT WE GOT IN THE WAY OF CHRISTMAS BOOKLETS, POST CARDS, STATIONERY, FANCY BOXES, SCENERY, ART AND SCENIC NOVELTIES, PHOTO AND POST CARD ALBUMS, SOFA PILLOWS AND CALENDARS, BURNED NOVELTIES, PYROGRAPHIC OUTFITS, MATERIALS AND PARTS. IN FACT, THEY MUST BE SEEN TO BE APPRECIATED. IT IS A PLEASURE TO SHOW OUR GOODS.

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