



Ririro

READ ANYWHERE, ANYTIME

Christmas Crackers: A Fantasia

J.H. Ewing

It was Christmas Eve in an old-fashioned country house, where Christmas was being kept with old-fashioned form and custom. It was getting late. The candles swaggered in their sockets, and the yule log glowed steadily like a red-hot coal.

"The fire has reached his heart," said the tutor. "He is warm all through. How red he is! He shines with heat and hospitality like some warm-hearted old gentleman when a convivial evening is pretty far advanced. Tomorrow he will be as cold and grey as the morning after a festival, when the glasses are being washed up and the host is calculating his expenses. Yes — you know it is so;" and the tutor nodded to the yule log as he spoke; and the log flared and crackled in return, till the tutor's face shone like its own. The log had no other means of reply.

The tutor was grotesque-looking at any time. He was lank and meagre, with a long body and long limbs and high shoulders. His face was smooth-shaven, and his skin like old parchment stretched over high cheekbones and lantern jaws; but in their hollow sockets his eyes gleamed with the changeful lustre of two precious gems. In the ruddy firelight they were like rubies, and when he drew back into the shade they glared green like the eyes of a cat.

It must not be inferred from the tutor's presence this evening that there were no Christmas holidays in this house. They had begun some days before; and if the tutor had had a home to go to, it is to be presumed that he would have gone.

As the candles got lower and the log flared less often, weird lights and shadows — such as haunt the twilight — crept about the room. The tutor's shadow, longer, lankier, and more grotesque than himself, mopped and mowed upon the wall beside him. The snapdragon burnt blue, and as the raisin-hunters stirred the flaming spirit, the ghastly light made the tutor look so hideous that the widow's little boy was on the verge of howling, and spilled the raisins he had just secured. (He did not like putting his fingers into the flames, but he hovered near the more adventurous schoolboys and collected the raisins scattered on the table by the hasty grabs of braver hands.)



The widow was a relative of the house. She had married a Mr. Jones, and having been during his life his devoted slave, had on his death transferred her allegiance to his son. The late Mr. Jones was a small man with a strong temper, a large appetite, and a taste for drawing-room theatricals. So Mrs. Jones had called her son Macready; "for," she said, "his poor papa would have made a fortune on the stage, and I wish to commemorate his talents. Besides, Macready sounds better with Jones than a commoner Christian name would do."

But his cousins called him MacGreedy.

"The apples of the enchanted garden were guarded by dragons. Many knights went after them. One wished for the apples, but he did not like to fight the dragons."

It was the tutor who spoke from the dark corner by the fireplace. His eyes shone like a cat's, and MacGreedy felt like a half-scared mouse, and made up his mind to cry. He put his right fist into one eye, and had just taken it out and was about to put his left fist into the other, when he saw that the tutor was no longer looking at him. So he made up his mind to go on with the raisins, for one can have a peevish cry at any time, but plums are not scattered broadcast every day. Several times he had tried to pocket them, but just at that moment the tutor was sure to look at him, and in his fright he dropped the raisins and never could find them again. So this time he resolved to eat them then and there. He had just put one into his mouth when the tutor leaned forward, and his eyes, glowing in the firelight, met MacGreedy's, who had not even the presence of mind to shut his mouth but remained spellbound, with a raisin in his cheek.

Flicker, flack! The schoolboys stirred up the snapdragon again, and with the blue

light upon his features the tutor made so horrible a grimace that MacGreedy swallowed the raisin with a start. He had bolted it whole, and it might have been a bread pill for any enjoyment he had of the flavour. But the tutor laughed aloud. He certainly was an alarming object, pulling those grimaces in the blue brandy glare — unpleasantly like a picture of Bogy himself with horns and a tail, in a juvenile volume upstairs. True, there were no horns to speak of among the tutor's grizzled curls, and his coat seemed to fit as well as most people's on his long back — so that unless he put his tail in his pocket, it is difficult to see how he could have had one. But then (as Miss Letitia said) "With dress one can do anything and hide anything." And on dress, Miss Letitia's opinion was final.

Miss Letitia was a cousin. She was dark, high-coloured, glossy-haired, stout, and showy. She was as neat as a new pin, and had a will of her own. Her hair was firmly fixed by bandoline, her garibaldis by an arrangement which failed when applied to those of the widow, and her opinions by the simple process of looking at everything from one point of view. Her forte was dress and general ornamentation — not that Miss Letitia was extravagant, far from it. If one may use the expression, she utilised for ornament a hundred bits and scraps that most people would have wasted. But, like other artists, she saw everything through the medium of her own art. She looked at birds with an eye to hats, and at flowers with reference to evening parties. At picture exhibitions and concerts she carried away jacket patterns and bonnets in her head, as other people make mental notes of an aerial effect or a bit of fine instrumentation. An enthusiastic horticulturalist once sent Miss Letitia a cut specimen of a new flower — a lovely spray from a lately-imported shrub. A botanist would have pressed it; an artist must have taken its portrait; a poet might have written a sonnet in praise of its beauty. Miss Letitia twisted a piece of wire round its stem and fastened it onto her black lace bonnet. It came on the day of a review, when Miss Letitia had to appear in a carriage, and it was quite a success. As she said to the widow, "It was so natural that no one could doubt its being Parisian."

"What a strange fellow that tutor is!" said the visitor.

He spoke to the daughter of the house, a girl with a face like a summer's day and hair like a ripe cornfield rippling in the sun. He was a fine young man, and had a youth's taste for the sports and amusements of his age. But lately he had changed. He seemed to himself to be living in a higher, nobler atmosphere than hitherto. He had discovered that he was poetical — he might prove to be a genius. He certainly was eloquent; he could talk for hours, and did so — to the young lady with the sunshiny face. They spoke on the highest subjects, and what a listener she was! So intelligent and appreciative, and with such an exquisite pose of the head — it must inspire a block of wood merely to see such a creature in a listening attitude. As to our young friend, he poured forth volumes; he was really clever, and for her he became eloquent. Tonight he spoke of Christmas, of

time-honoured custom and old association; and what he said would have made a Christmas article for a magazine of the first class. He poured scorn on the cold nature that could not, and the affectation that would not, appreciate the domestic festivities of this sacred season. What, he asked, could be more delightful, more perfect than such a gathering as this — the family circle round the Christmas hearth? He spoke with feeling, and it may be said with disinterested feeling, for he had not joined his own family circle this Christmas, and there was a vacant place by the hearth of his own home.

"He is strange," said the young lady (she spoke of the tutor in answer to the above remark), "but I am very fond of him. He has been with us so long he is like one of the family, though we know as little of his history as we did on the day he came."

"He looks clever," said the visitor. (Perhaps that is the least one can say for a fellow-creature who shows a great deal of bare skull, and is not otherwise good-looking.)

"He is clever," she answered, "wonderfully clever — so clever and so odd that sometimes I fancy he is hardly 'canny.' There is something almost supernatural about his acuteness and his ingenuity, but they are so kindly used. I wonder he has not brought out any playthings for us tonight."

"Playthings?" inquired the young man.

"Yes; on birthdays or festivals like this he generally brings something out of those huge pockets of his. He has been all over the world, and he produces Indian puzzles, Japanese flower-buds that bloom in hot water, and German toys with complicated machinery, which I suspect him of manufacturing himself. I call him Godpapa Grosselmayer, after that delightful old fellow in Hoffmann's tale of the Nutcracker."

"What's that about crackers?" inquired the tutor, sharply, his eyes changing colour like a fire opal.

"I am talking of *Nussknacker und Mausekönig*," laughed the young lady. "Crackers do not belong to Christmas; fireworks come on the fifth of November."

"Tut, tut!" said the tutor. "I always tell your ladyship that you are still a tomboy at heart, as when I first came, and you climbed trees and pelted myself and my young students with horse-chestnuts. You think of crackers to explode at the heels of timorous old gentlemen in a November fog; but I mean bonbon crackers, coloured crackers, dainty crackers — crackers for young people with mottoes of sentiment" — here the tutor shrugged his high shoulders an inch or two higher and turned the palms of his hands outwards with a glance indescribably comical — "crackers with paper prodigies, crackers with sweetmeats — such

sweetmeats!" He smacked his lips with a grotesque contortion and looked at Master MacGreedy, who choked himself with his last raisin and forthwith burst into tears.

The widow tried in vain to soothe him with caresses; he only stamped and howled the more. But Miss Letitia gave him some smart smacks on the shoulders to cure his choking fit, and as she kept up the treatment with vigour, the young gentleman was obliged to stop and assure her that the raisin had "gone the right way" at last. "If he were my child," Miss Letitia had been known to observe, with that confidence which characterises the theories of those who are not parents, "I would, etc., etc., etc." — in fact, Miss Letitia thought she would have made a very different boy of him, as indeed I believe she would.

"Are crackers all that you have for us, sir?" asked one of the two schoolboys, as they hung over the tutor's chair. They were twins, grand boys, with broad good-humoured faces and curly heads, as like as two puppy dogs of the same breed. They were only known apart by their intimate friends, and were always together — romping, laughing, snarling, squabbling, huffing and helping each other against the world. Each of them owned a wiry terrier, and in their relations to each other the two dogs (who were marvellously alike) closely followed the example of their masters.

"Do you not care for crackers, Jim?" asked the tutor.

"Not much, sir. They do for girls — but as you know, I care for nothing but military matters. Do you remember that beautiful toy of yours, 'The Besieged City'? Ah, I liked that. Look out, Tom! You're shoving my arm. Can't you stand straight, man?"

"R-r-r-r — snap!"

Tom's dog was resenting contact with Jim's dog on the hearthrug. There was a hustle among the four, and then they subsided.

"The Besieged City was all very well for you, Jim," said Tom, who meant to be a sailor, "but please to remember that it admitted of no attack from the sea; and what was there for me to do? Ah, sir, you are so clever, I often think you could help me make a swing with ladders instead of single ropes, so that I could run up and down the rigging while it was in full swing."

"That would be something like your fir-tree prank, Tom," said his sister. "Can you believe," she added, turning to the visitor, "that Tom lopped the branches of a tall young fir-tree all the way up, leaving little bits for foothold, and then climbed it one day in an awful storm of wind, and clung on at the top, rocking backwards and forwards? And when Papa sent word for him to come down, he said parental authority was superseded at sea by the rules of the service. It was a dreadful

storm, and the tree snapped very soon after he got safely to the ground."

"Storm!" sneered Tom. "A capful of wind. Well, it did blow half a gale at the last. But oh — it was glorious!"

"Let us see what we can make of the crackers," said the tutor — and he pulled some out of his pocket. They were put in a dish upon the table for the company to choose from; and the terriers jumped and snapped and tumbled over each other, for they thought the plate contained eatables. Animated by the same idea, but with quieter steps, Master MacGreedy also approached the table.

"The dogs are noisy," said the tutor, "too noisy. We must have quiet — peace and quiet." His lean hand was once more in his pocket, and he pulled out a box from which he took some powder, which he scattered on the burning log. A slight smoke now rose from the hot embers and floated into the room. Was the powder one of those strange compounds that act upon the brain? Was it a magician's powder? Who knows? With it came a sweet, subtle fragrance. It was strange — every one fancied they had smelt it before, and all were absorbed in wondering what it was and where they had met with it. Even the dogs sat on their haunches with their noses up, sniffing in a speculative manner.

"It's not lavender," said the grandmother, slowly, "and it's not rosemary. There is a something of tansy in it — and a very fine tonic flavour too, my dears, though it's not in fashion now. Depend upon it, it's a potpourri, and from an excellent recipe, sir." The old lady bowed courteously towards the tutor. "My mother made the best potpourri in the county, and it was very much like this. Not quite, perhaps, but much the same, much the same."

The grandmother was a fine old gentlewoman "of the old school," as the phrase is. She was very stately and gracious in her manners, daintily neat in her person, and much attached to the old parson of the parish, who now sat near her chair. All her life she had been very proud of her fine stock of fair linen, both household and personal; and for many years past had kept her own graveclothes ready in a drawer. They were bleached as white as snow, and lay amongst bags of dried lavender and potpourri. Many times it had seemed likely that they would be needed, for the old lady had had severe illnesses of late, when the good parson sat by her bedside and read to her of the coming of the Bridegroom, and of that "fine linen clean and white" which is "the righteousness of the saints." It was of that drawer, with its lavender and potpourri bags, that the scented smoke had reminded her.

"It has rather an overpowering odour," said the old parson. "It is suggestive of incense. I am sure I once smelt something like it in the Church of the Nativity at Bethlehem. It is very delicious."

The parson's long residence in his parish had been marked by one great holiday.

With the savings of many years he had performed a pilgrimage to the Holy Land; and it was rather a joke against him that he illustrated a large variety of subjects by reference to his favourite topic, the holiday of his life.

"It smells of gunpowder," said Jim, decidedly, "and something else. I can't tell what."

"Something one smells in a seaport town," said Tom.

"Can't be very delicious then," Jim retorted.

"It's not quite the same," piped the widow, "but it reminds me very much of an old bottle of attar of roses that was given to me when I was at school, with a copy of verses, by a young gentleman who was brother to one of the pupils. I remember Mr. Jones was quite annoyed when he found it in an old box, where I am sure I had not touched it for ten years or more; and I never spoke to him but once, on Examination Day — the young gentleman, I mean. And it's like — yes, it's certainly like a hair-wash Mr. Jones used to use. I've forgotten what it was called, but I know it cost fifteen shillings a bottle; and Macready threw one over a few weeks before his dear papa's death, and annoyed him extremely."

Whilst the company were thus engaged, Master MacGreedy took advantage of the general distraction to secure half a dozen crackers to his own share; he retired to a corner with them, where he meant to pick them quietly to pieces by himself. He wanted the gay paper, and the motto, and the sweetmeats; but he did not like the report of the cracker. And then what he did want, he wanted all to himself.

"Give us a cracker," said Master Jim, dreamily.

The dogs, after a few dissatisfied snorts, had dropped from their sitting posture and were lying close together on the rug, dreaming and uttering short commenting barks and whines at intervals. The twins were now reposing lazily at the tutor's feet, and did not feel disposed to exert themselves even so far as to fetch their own bonbons.

"There's one," said the tutor, taking a fresh cracker from his pocket. One end was of red and gold paper, the other of transparent green stuff with silver lines. The boys pulled it.

The report was louder than Jim had expected.

"The firing has begun," he murmured, involuntarily. "Steady, steady!" — these last words were to his horse, who seemed to be moving under him, not from fear, but from impatience. What had been the red and gold paper of the cracker was now the scarlet and gold lace of his own cavalry uniform. He knocked a speck from his sleeve and scanned the distant ridge, from which a thin line of

smoke floated solemnly away, with keen, impatient eyes. Were they to stand inactive all day?

Presently the horse erects his head. His eyes sparkle — he pricks his sensitive ears — his nostrils quiver with a strange delight. It is the trumpet! Fan farra! Fan farra! The brazen voice speaks — the horses move — the plumes wave — the helmets shine. On a summer's day they ride slowly, gracefully, calmly down a slope, to Death or Glory. Fan farra! Fan farra! Fan farra!

Of all this Master Tom knew nothing. The report of the cracker seemed to him only an echo in his brain of a sound that had been in his ears for thirty-six weary hours — the noise of a heavy sea beating against the ship's side in a gale. It was over now, and he was keeping the midnight watch on deck, gazing upon the liquid green of the waves, which, heaving and seething after storm, were lit with phosphorescent light, and as the ship held steadily on her course, poured past at the rate of twelve knots an hour in a silvery stream. Faster than any ship can sail, his thoughts travelled home; and as old times came back to him, he hardly knew whether what he looked at was the phosphor-lighted sea or green gelatine paper barred with silver. And did the tutor speak? Or was it the voice of some sea monster sounding in his ears?

"The spirits of the storm have gone below to make their report. The treasure gained from sunk vessels has been reckoned, and the sea is illuminated in honour of the spoil."

The visitor now took a cracker and held it to the young lady. Her end was of white paper with a raised pattern; his of dark-blue gelatine with gold stars. It snapped, the bonbon dropped between them, and the young man got the motto. It was a very bald one:

My heart is thine.

Wilt thou be mine?

He was ashamed to show it to her. What could be more meagre? One could write a hundred better couplets standing on one leg, as the saying is. He was trying to improvise just one for the occasion, when he became aware that the sky over his head was dark with the shades of night and lighted with stars. A brook rippled nearby with a soothing monotony. The evening wind sighed through the trees and wafted the fragrance of the sweet bay-leaved willow towards him, and blew a stray lock of hair against his face.

She was also there. Walking beside him, under the scented willow bushes. Where, why, and whither he did not ask to know. She was with him — with him; and he seemed to tread on the summer air. He had no doubt as to the nature of his own feelings for her, and here was such an opportunity for declaring them as might never come again. Surely now, if ever, he would be eloquent! Thoughts of

poetry clothed in words of fire must spring unbidden to his lips at such a moment. And yet somehow he could not find a single word to say. He beat his brains, but not an idea would come forth — only that idiotic cracker motto, which haunted him with its meagre couplet:

My heart is thine.

Wilt thou be mine?

Meanwhile they wandered on. The precious time was passing. He must at least make a beginning. "What a fine night it is!" he observed. But oh dear — that was a thousand times balder and more meagre than the cracker motto; and not another word could he find to say. At this moment the awkward silence was broken by a voice from a neighbouring copse. It was a nightingale singing to his mate. There was no lack of eloquence — melodious eloquence — there. The song was as plaintive as old memories, and as full of tenderness as the eyes of the young girl were full of tears. They were standing still now, and with her graceful head bent she was listening to the bird. He stooped his head near hers and spoke with a simple, natural outburst, almost involuntary.

"Do you ever think of old times? Do you remember the old house, and the fun we used to have? And the tutor whom you pelted with horse-chestnuts when you were a little girl? And those cracker bonbons, and the motto we drew —

My heart is thine.

Wilt thou be mine?"

She smiled, and lifted her eyes ("blue as the sky, and bright as the stars," he thought) to his, and answered "Yes."

Then the bonbon motto was avenged, and there was silence. Eloquent, perfect, complete, beautiful silence! Only the wind sighed through the fragrant willows, the stream rippled, the stars shone, and in the neighbouring copse the nightingale sang, and sang, and sang.

When the white end of the cracker came into the young lady's hand, she was full of admiration for the fine raised pattern. As she held it between her fingers it suddenly struck her that she had discovered what the tutor's fragrant smoke smelt like. It was like the scent of orange-flowers, and had certainly a soporific effect upon the senses. She felt very sleepy, and as she stroked the shiny surface of the cracker she found herself thinking it was very soft for paper, and then rousing herself with a start, wondering at her own folly in speaking thus of the white silk in which she was dressed, and of which she was holding up the skirt between her finger and thumb, as if she were dancing a minuet.

"It's Grandmamma's egg-shell brocade!" she cried. "Oh, Grandmamma! Have you given it to me? That lovely old thing! But I thought it was the family

wedding-dress, and that I was not to have it till I was a bride."

"And so you are, my dear. And a fairer bride the sun never shone on," sobbed the old lady, who was kissing and blessing her, and wishing her in the words of the old formula:

*Health to wear it,
Strength to tear it,
And money to buy another.*

"There is no hope for the last two things, you know," said the young girl, "for I am sure the flag that braved a thousand years was not half so strong as your brocade; and as to buying another, there are none to be bought in these degenerate days."

The old lady's reply was probably very gracious, for she liked to be complimented on the virtues of old things in general, and of her egg-shell brocade in particular. But of what she said her granddaughter heard nothing. With the strange irregularity of dreams, she found herself — she knew not how — in the old church. It was true. She was a bride, standing there with old friends and old associations thick around her, on the threshold of a new life. The sun shone through the stained glass of the windows and illuminated the brocade, whose old-fashioned stiffness so became her childish beauty, and flung a thousand new tints over her sunny hair, and drew so powerful a fragrance from the orange blossom with which it was twined that it was almost overpowering. Yes — it was too sweet, too strong. She certainly would not be able to bear it much longer without losing her senses. And the service was going on. A question had been asked of her, and she must reply. She made a strong effort, and said "Yes," simply and very earnestly, for it was what she meant. But she had no sooner said it than she became uneasily conscious that she had not used the right words. Someone laughed. It was the tutor, and his voice jarred and disturbed the dream, as a stone troubles the surface of still water. The vision trembled, and then broke, and the young lady found herself still sitting by the table, fingering the cracker paper, whilst the tutor chuckled and rubbed his hands by the fire, and his shadow scrambled on the wall like an ape upon a tree. But her "Yes" had passed into the young man's dream without disturbing it, and he dreamt on.

It was a cracker like the preceding one that the grandmother and the parson pulled together. The old lady had insisted upon it. The good rector had shown a tendency to low spirits this evening, and a wish to withdraw early. But the old lady did not approve of people "shirking" — as boys say — either their duties or their pleasures; and to keep a merry Christmas in a family circle that had been spared to meet in health and happiness seemed to her to be both the one and

the other.

It was his sermon for next day which weighed on the parson's mind. Not that he was behindhand with that part of his duties — he was far too methodical in his habits for that, and it had been written before the bustle of Christmas week began. But after preaching Christmas sermons from the same pulpit for thirty-five years, he felt keenly how difficult it is to awaken due interest in subjects that are so familiar, and to give new force to lessons so often repeated. So he wanted a quiet hour in his own study before he went to rest, with the sermon that did not satisfy him and the subject that should be so heart-stirring and ever new — the Story of Bethlehem.

He consented, however, to pull one cracker with the grandmother, though he feared the noise might startle her nerves, and said so.

"Nerves were not invented in my young days," said the old lady, firmly; and she took her part in the ensuing explosion without so much as a wink.

As the crackers snapped, it seemed to the parson as if the fragrant smoke from the yule log were growing denser in the room. Through the mist the face of the tutor loomed large from time to time, and then disappeared. At last the clouds rolled away, and the parson breathed clear air. Clear — yes, and how clear. This brilliant freshness, these intense lights and shadows, this mildness and purity in the night air —

"It is not England," he muttered. "It is the East. I have felt no air like this since I breathed the air of Palestine."

Over his head, through immeasurable distances, the dark-blue space was lighted by the great multitude of the stars, whose glittering ranks have in that atmosphere a distinctness and a glory unseen in our latitudes. Perhaps no scene of beauty in the visible creation has proved a more hackneyed theme for the poet and the philosopher than a starry night. But not all the superabundance of simile and moral illustration with which the subject has been loaded can rob the beholder of the freshness of its grandeur or the force of its teaching — that noblest and most majestic vision of the handiwork of God on which the eye of man is here permitted to rest.

As the parson gazed, he became conscious that he was not alone. Other eyes besides his were watching the skies tonight. Dark, profound, patient, eastern eyes — used from the cradle to the grave to watch and wait. The eyes of stargazers and dream-interpreters; men who believed the fate of empires to be written in shining characters on the face of heaven, as the "Mene, Mene" was written in fire on the walls of the Babylonian palace. The old parson was one of the many men of real learning and wide reading who pursue their studies in the quiet country parishes of England, and it was with the keen interest of

intelligence that he watched the group of figures that lay near him.

"Is this a vision of the past?" he asked himself. "There can be no doubt as to these men. They are star-gazers, magi — and, from their dress and bearing, men of high rank; perhaps 'teachers of a higher wisdom' in one of the purest philosophies of the old heathen world. When one thinks," he pursued, "of the intense interest, the eager excitement which the student of history finds in the narrative of the past as unfolded in dusty records written by the hand of man, one may realise how absorbing must have been that science which professed to unveil the future, and to display to the eyes of the wise the fate of dynasties written with the finger of God amid the stars."

The dark-robed figures were so still they might almost have been carved in stone. The air seemed to grow purer and purer; the stars shone brighter and brighter; suspended in ether, the planets seemed to hang like lamps. Now a shooting meteor passed athwart the sky and vanished behind the hill. But not for this did the watchers move. In silence they watched on — till, on a sudden, how and whence the parson knew not, across the shining ranks of that immeasurable host whose names and number are known to God alone, there passed in slow but obvious motion one brilliant, solitary star — a star of such surpassing brightness that he involuntarily joined in the wild cry of joy and greeting with which the Men of the East now prostrated themselves with their faces to the earth.

He could not understand the language in which, with noisy clamour and gesticulation, they broke their former profound and patient silence and greeted the portent for which they had watched. But he knew now that these were the Wise Men of the Epiphany, and that this was the Star of Bethlehem. In his ears rang the energetic simplicity of the Gospel narrative: "When they saw the Star, they rejoiced with exceeding great joy."

With exceeding great joy! Ah, happy magi — who, more blessed than Balaam the son of Beor, were faithful to the dim light vouchsafed to them. Ye travelled long and far to bring royal offerings to the King of the Jews, with a faith not found in Israel. Ye saw him whom prophets and kings had desired to see, and were glad. Wise men indeed, and wise with the highest wisdom, in that ye suffered yourselves to be taught of God.

Then the parson prayed that if this were indeed a dream, he might dream on — might pass, if only in a vision, over the hill, following the footsteps of the magi while the Star went before them, till he should see it rest above that city which, little indeed among the thousands of Judah, was yet the birthplace of the Lord's Christ.

"Ah," he almost sobbed, "let me follow! On my knees let me follow into the

house and see the Holy Child. In the eyes of how many babies have I seen mind and thought far beyond their powers of communication — every mother knows. But if at times, with a sort of awe, one sees the immortal soul shining through the prison-bars of helpless infancy, what — oh, what — must it be to behold the Godhead veiled in flesh through the face of a little child!"

The parson stretched out his arms, but even with the passion of his words the vision began to break. He dared not move for fear it should utterly fade; and as he lay still and silent, the wise men roused their followers, and led by the Star, the train passed solemnly over the distant hills.

Then the clear night became clouded with fragrant vapour, and with a sigh the parson awoke.

When the cracker snapped and the white end was left in the grandmother's hand, she was astonished to perceive — as she thought — that the white lace veil which she had worn over her wedding bonnet was still in her possession, and that she was turning it over in her fingers. "I fancied I gave it to Jemima when her first baby was born," she muttered dreamily. It was darned and yellow, but it carried her back all the same, and recalled happy hours with wonderful vividness. She remembered the post-chaise and the postilion. "He was such a pert little fellow, and how we laughed at him! He must be either dead or a very shaky old man by now," said the old lady.

She seemed to smell the scent of meadow-sweet that was so powerful in a lane through which they drove; and how clearly she could see the clean little country inn where they spent the honeymoon! She seemed to be there now, taking off her bonnet and shawl in the quaint clean chamber with the heavy oak rafters and the jasmine coming in at the window, and glancing with pardonable pride at the fair face reflected in the mirror. But as she laid her things on the patchwork coverlet, it seemed to her that the lace veil became fine white linen, folded about a figure that lay in the bed; and when she looked round the room again everything was draped in white — white blinds hung before the windows, and even the old oak chest and the press were covered with clean white cloths, after the decent custom of the country; whilst from the church tower without, the passing bell tolled slowly.

She had not seen the face of the corpse, and a strange anxiety came over her to count the strokes of the bell, which tell if it is a man, woman, or child who has passed away. One, two, three, four, five, six, seven. No more. It was a woman, and when she looked on the face of the dead she saw her own. But even as she looked, the fair linen of the grave-clothes became the buoyant drapery of another figure, in whose face she found a strange recognition of the lineaments of the dead combined with all the loveliness of the bride — but ah, much more! On that face there was a beauty not doomed to wither, before those happy eyes

lay a future unshadowed by the imperfections of earthly prospects, and the folds of that robe were white as no fuller on earth can white them. The window curtain parted, the jasmine flowers bowed their heads, the spirit passed from the chamber of death, and the old lady's dream was ended.

Miss Letitia had shared a cracker with the widow. The widow squeaked when the cracker went off, and then insisted upon giving up the smart paper and everything to Miss Letitia. She had always given up everything to Mr. Jones, she did so now to Master MacGreedy, and was quite unaccustomed to keeping anything for her own share. She did not give this explanation herself, but so it was.

The cracker that thus fell into the hands of Miss Letitia was one of those new-fashioned ones that have a paper pattern of some article of dress wrapped up in them instead of a bonbon. This one was a paper bonnet made in the latest mode — of green tissue paper — and Miss Letitia stuck it on the top of her chignon with an air that the widow envied from the bottom of her heart. The widow had not the gift of "carrying off" her clothes. But to the tutor, on the contrary, it seemed to afford the most extreme amusement; and as Miss Letitia bowed gracefully hither and thither in the energy of her conversation with the widow, the green paper fluttering with each emphasis, he fairly shook with delight, his shadow dancing like a maniac beside him. He had scattered some more powder on the coals, and it may have been that the smoke got into Miss Letitia's eyes and confused her ideas of colour; but she was struck with a fervid and otherwise unaccountable admiration for the paper ends of the cracker, which were most unusually ugly. One was of a sallowish salmon-colour and transparent, the other of brick-red paper with a fringe. As Miss Letitia turned them over, she saw to her unspeakable delight that there were several yards of each material, and her peculiar genius instantly seized upon the fact that in the present rage for double skirts there might be enough of the two kinds to combine into a fashionable dress.

It had never struck her before that a dirty salmon went well with brick red. "They blend so becomingly, my dear," she murmured; "and I think the under skirt will sit well — it is so stiff."

The widow did not reply. The fumes of the tutor's compound made her sleepy, and though she nodded to Miss Letitia's observations, it was less from appreciation of their force than from inability to hold up her head. She was dreaming uneasy, horrible dreams, like nightmares — in which from time to time there mingled expressions of doubt and dissatisfaction that fell from Miss Letitia's lips. "Just half a yard short — no gores — false hem" (and the melancholy reflection that) "flounces take so much stuff." Then the tutor's face

kept appearing and vanishing with horrible grimaces through the mist. At last the widow fell fairly asleep, and dreamed that she was married to the Bluebeard of nursery annals, and that on his return from his memorable journey he had caught her in the act of displaying the mysterious cupboard to Miss Letitia. As he waved his scimitar over her head, he seemed unaccountably to assume the form and features of the tutor. In her agitation the poor woman could think of no plea against his severity, except that the cupboard was already crammed with the corpses of his previous wives, and there was no room for her. She was pleading this argument when Miss Letitia's voice broke in upon her dream with decisive accent:

"There's enough for two bodies."

The widow shrieked and awoke.

"High and low," explained Miss Letitia. "My dear, what are you screaming about?"

"I am very sorry indeed," said the widow. "I beg your pardon, I'm sure, a thousand times. But since Mr. Jones's death I have been so nervous, and I had such a horrible dream. And oh dear, oh dear!" she added. "What is the matter with my precious child? Macready, love, come to your mamma, my pretty lamb."

Ugh! There were groans from the corner where Master MacGreedy sat on his crackers as if they were eggs, and he hatching them. He had only touched one, as yet, of the stock he had secured. He had picked it to pieces, had avoided the snap, and had found a large comfit like an egg with a rough shell inside. Everyone knows that the goodies in crackers are not of a very superior quality. There is a large amount of chalky sugar in the outside, thinly disguised by a shabby flavour of sweetness. But that outside once disposed of, there lies an almond at the core. Now, an almond is a very delicious thing in itself, and doubly nice when it takes the taste of chalk out of one's mouth. But in spite of all the sugar and chalk through which he had sucked his way, MacGreedy could not come to the almond. A dozen times he had been on the point of spitting out the delusive sweetmeat; but just as he thought of it he was sure to feel a bit of hard rough edge, and thinking he had gained the kernel at last, he held valiantly on. It only proved to be a rough bit of sugar, however, and still the interminable coating melted copiously in his mouth; and still the clean, fragrant almond evaded his hopes. At last with a groan he spat the seemingly undiminished bonbon onto the floor, and turned as white and trembling as an arrowroot blancmange.

In obedience to the widow's entreaties, the tutor opened a window and tried to carry MacGreedy to the fresh air; but that young gentleman utterly refused to allow the tutor to approach him, and was borne howling to bed by his mamma.

With the fresh air the fumes of the fragrant smoke dispersed, and the company roused themselves.

"Rather oppressive, eh?" said the master of the house, who had had his dream too — with which we have no concern.

The dogs had had theirs also, and had testified to it in their sleep by low growls and whines. Now they shook themselves and rubbed against each other, growling in a warlike manner through their teeth and wagging peaceably with their little stumpy tails.

The twins shook themselves, and fell to squabbling as to whether they had been to sleep or not; and, if either, which of them had given way to that weakness.

Miss Letitia took the paper bonnet from her head with a nervous laugh, and after looking regretfully at the cracker papers, put them in her pocket.

The parson went home through the frosty night. In the village street he heard a boy's voice singing two lines of an old Christmas hymn —

*Trace we the Babe who hath redeemed our loss,
From the poor Manger to the bitter Cross —*

and his eyes filled with tears.

The old lady went to bed and slept in peace.

"In all the thirty-five years we have been privileged to hear you, sir," she told the rector next day after service, "I never heard such a Christmas sermon before."

The visitor carefully preserved the blue paper and the cracker motto. He came down early next morning to find the white half to put with them. He did not find it, for the young lady had taken it the night before.

The tutor had been in the room before him, wandering round the scene of the evening's festivities. The yule log lay black and cold upon the hearth, and the tutor nodded to it. "I told you how it would be," he said; "but never mind — you have had your day, and a merry one too." In the corner lay the heap of crackers which Master MacGreedy had been too ill to remember when he retired. The tutor pocketed them with a grim smile.

As to the comfit, it was eaten by one of the dogs, who had come down earliest of all. He swallowed it whole — so whether it contained an almond or not remains a mystery to the present time.

Instagram: @riri_reading · Pinterest: pinterest.com/ririocom