

## CHRISTMAS IN A FRENCH BOARDING-SCHOOL.



CHRISTMAS morning of more than twenty years ago is breaking over a picturesque old town of

fair France. The cold wintry sun touches upon the masts of the ships in her harbour and upon the crowded houses of the Lower Town, creeps up to the leafless trees upon the ramparts, and glints upon the steep roofs and stately cathedral of the Upper Town.

From the dormitory windows of a large boarding-school some dozen or more of girlish heads are peering into the feeble light, in the hope of seeing across the narrow "silver streak" the white cliffs of their English home. In vain. A cold, grey fog is rising from the sea, and baffles even their strong young eyes. The casements are closed, and as the big school-bell sends forth its summons, the English boarders hasten into the class-room below. It does not look very inviting at this early hour; there is no fire and little light, while the empty benches and the absence of the usual chattering throng of schoolgirls serve only to make those of them who remain the more depressed. They gather, from force of habit, round the fireless stove, and wish one another a "Merry Christmas"; but they neither look nor feel as if a merry Christmas could be theirs. With hands swollen with chilblains and faces blue with cold, they stand, a shivering group, comparing this with former anniversaries, and increasing their discomfort by reminding one another of the warm firesides, the ample Christmas cheer, and the lavish gifts with which the day is being ushered in at home.

At length the welcome sound of the breakfast-bell is heard, and our small party descends to the *réfectoire*. Here excellent hot coffee and omelettes, with the best of bread and butter, somewhat reconcile us to our hard lot, while the different mistresses are really very kind to *les petites désolées*, and do their best to enliven the meal. We are told that during the ten days' holiday now begun we shall be entirely exempted from the necessity of talking French, and shall be allowed to get up and go to bed an hour later than during the school terms; moreover, that after

service in our own church that morning (for, to their credit be it said, these ladies, devout Catholics themselves, never tampered with our belief), we should have a good fire lighted in the small class-room, where we could amuse ourselves as we pleased for the rest of the day.

After such good news we set off, under the escort of the English governess, in revived spirits for church. It was a plain little building, but we always liked to go; it seemed a bit of old England transplanted into this foreign town; and to-day the holly and flowers, the familiar hymns, and our pastor's short and telling address, made the service particularly bright and cheery.

We were very fond of our good, gentle little clergyman, and always lingered a while after the services in the hope that he would speak to us, as he often did, especially upon any Church festivals; and to-day we had quite a long talk with him before, with many and hearty good wishes, we parted in the church porch.

As usual, after service, we went for a walk on the ramparts which encircle the Upper Town. The view was very fine, comprising on one side the Lower Town, the shining waters of the Channel, and, on very clear days, the houses as well as the cliffs of Dover; on the other, the hills and valleys, watered by the Liane; if we went further still, and passed the gloomy old château—now a prison—we could trace the roads leading to Calais and St. Omer; while on a bleak hill to the left rose Napoleon's Column.

This rampart walk was a great favourite with us all, and we generally liked to make two or three turns. To-day, however, we were to have an early luncheon, and, besides, were yearning for our letters; so we contented ourselves with *le petit tour*, and hurried home. Here we found an ample mail awaiting us, whilst among the pile each girl found a neat little French *billet* from mademoiselle, inviting us formally to dinner and a little dance that evening. Of course we sat down at once to write our acceptances, then, with a cheer for mademoiselle, turned our thoughts to the absorbing topic of what we should wear. Dinner was fixed for 5 p.m., so that after luncheon there was really not very much time left, especially as each girl, besides the difficulty of choosing and arranging her most becoming costume, had also to have her hair "done."

Hair-dressing was an elaborate science in those days, puffs and frisettes, curls and plaits, being all brought into requisition on state occasions, and if this—a dinner and a dance given by mademoiselle, the rather awe-inspiring though extremely kind mademoiselle, who reigned an undisputed autocrat in our little school-world—if this, I say, was not a state occasion, I appeal to every schoolgirl throughout the kingdom to tell me what was.

The *dortoir* was a gay and animated scene as we English girls repaired thither after

luncheon to "lay out" (rather a dismal phrase, but one we always used) our best frocks and sashes, our open-worked stockings and evening shoes, and our black or white silk mittens. One of the girls was a capital hairdresser, as everyone else allowed, and as her services were eagerly entreated by the less skilful in the art, I can tell you her powers and her patience were put to the test that afternoon.

Oh, the plaiting and waving, the padding and puffing, the crimping and curling, that we gladly underwent on that memorable occasion! How openly we admired one another, and—more secretly—ourselves; and then how very funny it seemed to be walking into the drawing-room as mademoiselle's visitors!

Kind mademoiselle! how handsome she looked in her dark satin dress, with a little old French lace at her throat and wrists! How pleasantly she welcomed us all, while she gave extra care to the one child amongst us, who could only wear black ribbons even for Christmas Day.

Of course, all the under-mistresses were there, and one or two of the *non-resident* ones. I particularly remember the pretty singing mistress, and the head music mistress, whose brother I hear of nowadays as the first organist of Europe; whilst last of all to arrive was Monsieur l'Abbé, who was a frequent and honoured guest, and for whose coming we had all been waiting.

The dinner bell rang a few minutes after this important arrival, and we all descended to the *réfectoire*. How good that dinner was! A soup such as one never tastes anywhere but in France; the *bouilli*, which we were too English to care for; the turkey stuffed with chestnuts—delicious, but so unlike an English turkey; the plum pudding, very good again, but still with a foreign element about it somehow; and, as a winding up delicacy, the delicious *tourte à la crème*, a real triumph of gastronomy.

Then our glasses were filled with claret, and we drank the "health of parents and relations," a rather perilous toast for some of us, whose hearts were still tender from a recent parting; and finally coffee was served—not the coffee of everyday life, but the real *café noir*, which we girls drank with an extra dose of sugar, but which to seniors was served with a little cognac. Then, as we sat over our fruit and *galette*, mademoiselle and her mother, a charming old lady, with bright, dark eyes, and soft, silver hair, combined with Monsieur l'Abbé to keep us merry with a succession of amusing stories of French life and adventure, until the repeated ringing of the hall bell announced the arrival of some of the old pupils, who had been asked to join our dance. Tables were quickly cleared, superfluous chairs and benches removed, violin and piano set up a gay tune, and then we danced and danced away until nearly midnight, when the appearance of *eau sucrée* and lemonade, with a tray of tempting cakes, concluded the fun, and gave the signal for retiring.

