

THE CHRISTMAS DINNER.

BY GEORGE BREALEY.



ARROWS SHOT AT A
VENTURE.

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The Christmas Dinner.



“BE sartin sure ’tis true!” said a loud-voiced, red-faced woman, as she stood at the door of her dwelling, with arms a-kimbo, addressing a group of her neighbours who stood around her. “The maister nivver made a fule o’ any on us yet; an’ me an’ my ole man’s a-

goin' on Christmas Eve, and, please God, us'll have a better dinner this Christmas Day than us did last."

"Don't you believe it, Molly," said a respectably-dressed man who stood on the outskirts of the group. "Somebody's been tellin' you a lie."

"The maister hisself told my ole man, zur," replied Molly; "and I should like to see," added she, her wrath rising, as she advanced a step or two towards the last speaker, doubling up her fists as she spoke, "I should like to see the man that says maister's a liar."

A general titter burst from the group as the man retired with a muttered curse; and the titter ended in a loud, taunting

laugh as he retreated down the alley and vanished up a court.

“But, Molly,” remonstrated the gentle voice of a delicate woman, “the Book tells us to forgive our enemies, and to do good to them that hate us and persecute us. I’m sure the maister wouldn’t like to see you ready to fight everybody that calls ’im a liar.”

“Yes, yes; very like,” replied Molly. “But when folks as set themselves up to be somebody, when they ain’t nobody, comes round tellin’ such brazen-faced lies as that”—and she flourished her arms again—“why it’s more than flesh an’ blood can stand.”

The scene of this incident was one of

those crowded, narrow alleys that abound in some of our large towns. It was the abode of the very poor, and poverty had plainly set her mark on the inhabitants and all their surroundings. The narrow street was full of the sickening odour of decaying vegetable matter, which lay about in large heaps. Swarms of dirty, ragged children were grovelling in the gutter; their little thin, pinched faces, looking old before infancy had passed, and their sharp, shrill voices, were pitiful to see and to hear.

The man who had so roused Molly's anger was the landlord's agent, who, on his weekly visit to collect the rents, had thought fit to cast doubt on some news

that Molly had been spreading among her neighbours.

Only those who have lived and laboured among the very poor can have any conception of what is meant by the word *poverty*. Words would fail adequately to describe the utter and absolute wretchedness and misery of large numbers of the poor who live in our midst. Cold, hunger, nakedness, are their daily, their nightly companions; scorched by the heats of summer, pent up in a narrow alley where the air is hot and putrid; and in winter pierced by the biting winds, numbed by the frost, drenched by the rain, at night creeping cold and hungry to their comfortless beds, with no hope of anything

better in this world, and very often knowing little and caring less about the world to come. Such was once the state of a large number, and such is still the state of many of our poor.

One Christmas I asked the Lord to send me money enough to give a good dinner to all the poor in the parish in which I lived. He answered my prayer, and moved the hearts of some charitable people to send me enough to make provision for *all*. I entered the name of every poor family in a book, with the number of their children, and got all things ready. Then, a few days before Christmas, I sent an invitation personally to every family to come on Christmas Eve for the

dinner I had been able to prepare for them. In the room where the distribution was to take place we had ranged out on the table piles of loaves of bread, long rows of pieces of meat, bags of flour and fruit for Christmas puddings, and various other things, with the name of every family on their lot. There was plenty for all, and dinners for many days to come. At the hour appointed there were plenty of helpers to distribute the good things as the names were called from *the book*.

After many hours of busy work the crowd began to diminish, and then came the last of the company. Still there was one lot left; the name was on it, and was

called again and again, but there was no answer. When the hour for closing the door had long passed, and this lot was still unclaimed, a stranger from a distant parish came and begged hard for a share in the good things. His name was not on the book; but there was one lot left. At last we gave it to this poor stranger, and he went away with such joy as can only be imagined by those who know what it is to obtain a respite from almost starvation.

Long after this, when the evening was somewhat advanced, came the woman whose lot had been taken by the stranger, and asked if there was any for her.

“Why did you not come at the time appointed?” we asked.

“I did not believe it was true,” she replied.

“Well, you have lost the dinner for yourself and all your family through your unbelief.” And she went away in great disappointment.

Now, dear reader, this is a simple illustration of what happens at the great feast that is provided by God for poor, needy sinners. The feast is ready, ready for *all*, ready now. The invitation is as free and general and open as an invitation can well be. This invitation is repeated in the Bible in various forms. Here is one form: “Ho, every one that thirsteth, come ye to the waters, and he that hath no

money; . . . yea, come, buy wine and milk without money and without price." If that does not exactly suit you, here is another: "Come unto Me, all ye that labour and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest." "If any man thirst, let him come unto Me, and drink." "Wherefore do ye spend money for that which is not bread? and your labour for that which satisfieth not? hearken diligently unto Me, and eat ye that which is good, and let your soul delight itself in fatness. Incline your ear, and come unto Me: hear, and your soul shall live." "With everlasting kindness will I have mercy on thee, saith the Lord thy Redeemer." None will be excluded but those who

exclude themselves either by their wilful *rejection* of God's wondrous love, or by sinful *neglect*, or by *doubting* the truth of the invitation. With me it was not a question whether those invited were worthy or unworthy. No question was raised whether the people went to church or not, whether they were people of good character or bad. The only condition was being *poor*. And this is just what the servants of Christ have to declare to all they meet: "Come; for all things are ready."

"To whom are they to come?" "To Jesus." What are they to obtain by coming? A *feast* for the soul, *rest* for the *weary*, joy for the sorrowful, peace

for the troubled, cleansing for the defiled, health for the sick, pardon for the guilty, salvation for the lost, life for the dead, all we need for time and for eternity, all is provided in this great feast.

And all are invited, all are welcome, who come *now*. God has fixed the hour when the door of mercy shall be closed. And when once closed it will not be opened again for those who have rejected God's invitation. Therefore, dear fellow sinner, do not let this precious offer pass by without taking this great salvation. God will not be defeated in His purpose to fill the hall. There will not be an empty seat at the table, though there will be many absent ones who have been in-

vited, but their places will be filled by others. And the places are being quickly filled every day, while those who were invited, but would not come, are now rejected. Days and weeks roll swiftly on; each day brings us a day nearer to eternity, a day nearer to the end of the world. To some a long warning is given of coming death; others are cut off in a moment. But to all of us Christ, when He comes the second time, will come suddenly and without warning, when the hour that He has fixed on has arrived.

Suddenly, in the midst of the world's business, the Son of man will be seen coming in the clouds of heaven. The door of mercy will then be closed. The

banquet-hall will be full; there will be no more room. Those who have rejected, or carelessly omitted to accept, the invitation of Christ, will call upon the rocks and the hills to hide them from His presence.

It is dangerous to trifle with death and eternity. "Behold, now is the accepted time; behold, now is the day of salvation."



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