

A NIGHT WITH THE CHRISTMAS WAITS.

See that knot of people in front of that open cottage door. What are they doing? They seem to be anxiously watching the clouds as they flit across the face of the moon, hiding from our view those sparkling lights which glitter in the blue vaults of heaven, and which Shakspeare has happily designated "night's candles," and casting an imperfect and fleeting shadow on terra firma. What are the gazers looking for? Have they seen the long-expected comet? Have the flitting clouds temporarily hidden it from their view, and are they waiting until another opening between the clouds shall pass over the spot where they last saw it, and again reveal it to their sight? No. The terror-stricken believers in the cock and bull story respecting the then coming dread events of the 13th of June, 1857, have long since ceased to look for the coming comet, and to show signs of a wish to depart, or change the subject of conversation, when the comet is mentioned. What, then, are these doing, and who are they? Well, that little fellow resting against one of the side posts of the door, can play very well on the bass viol, and that tall gentleman at the front, with his back against the lamp-post, can manage to play a few tunes which he has practised, until they are miserably threadbare, on the little violin. They ought to change instruments, do you say? Well, it might seem more *apropos* for the little fellow to have the little instrument, but it must not be, because the big gentleman cannot manage the big fiddle. Behind the latter you observe two females, one of whom has a very good treble voice, and her companion can sing the soprano parts of a few tunes she has learned by rote. That little gentleman on the right side of the window can sing alto, and although his voice may not be the sweetest possible, yet he has one quality in perfection—he can make himself heard. That tall gentleman on his left (Mr. Baritone) can sing a little *bass*, and although his rendering of some musical passages is *bass* with a vengeance, and his trainer pronounces him not quite *tuneable*, yet he is allowed to join this company because he either is, or thinks he is, paying his addresses to Miss Treble. That young gentleman without beard or whiskers, who has just joined our friend at the lamp-post, is a very fair tenor, and would fain become an intimate acquaintance of Miss Soprano, but she happens to have a more favoured friend elsewhere, whose companionship she greatly prefers. That steady-going gentleman who is conversing with Mr. Violoncello, is able to take any part you like, but prefers *bass*. He is, in fact, the leader and trainer of all the singers in this little band, and, indeed, without his guiding voice, it is thought Mr. Baritone would often be a *bar* behind, or a *tone* too low. Well, these ladies and gentlemen have been practising every night for upwards of a week, and they are now satisfied that they have got a dozen pieces of music thoroughly well up. It is now Christmas Eve, at ten o'clock. I think you will be able now to divine what they are, and what they are gazing at. Why, yes, they are carol singers, and they are looking at the clouds to see whether it is likely to rain, or to snow, or to be fair and fine after midnight. Well they do not seem to need to give themselves the trouble, for there are no signs of snow, nor of rain either, although the latter may come at any hour, without much warning. I would seriously advise them, therefore, to be provided with umbrellas, and they seem to think it desirable, for, see you, Mr. Baritone has just marched off to a neighbour's house, to borrow two umbrellas, in addition to what they already possess. The others have retired into the cottage. Let us look through that hole in the blind, and see what they are doing. That would be eaves-dropping, do you say? Not under present circumstances,—remember that I am now acting for you in the capacity of the "Devil on two Sticks."

See, there they are all sat round a table, discussing some knotty point. They have settled that it is likely to be a pretty fine night, and they are now about to settle the route they are to take. They are pretty well acquainted with the tempers and dispositions of a certain knot of individuals, and they are booked to be waited upon during the ensuing morning. Booked did I say? Aye, in their memories; but there is no memorandum made of the resolutions passed at this meeting. This being settled, they are about to separate for about an hour and a half, but Miss Soprano has some doubt about the last piece they learned, which is rather a difficult one, besides being new, and since it is to be brought out in style by this company, they must needs just try it once more. They do so; Mr. Baritone, having returned, joins them. The piece is sung, and passes off very well. Mr. Leader informs Mr. Baritone that he has managed that passage where he used to be too slow very well indeed; and Miss Soprano does not now sing a single note too low. That is capital, and puts the whole band in good spirits. They are about to retire; some to get a cup of coffee, and others to get washed and dressed up a bit. But who is this coming up in breathless haste? She does not stop to knock at the door, but opens it, bolts in, and does not keep them long in suspense; for she informs them that she has learned that Mr. Jingle, whose services had not been sought by this company, has formed a company of his own, and is going round with a clarioneteer for a leader, and has arranged to call at certain places as soon as the clock strikes twelve. This news causes a bit of a scowl to come over the faces of this company, but it is turned into a contemptuous laugh. Mr. Leader declares that Mr. Jingle will, with his lot, be able to sing nothing but some of the old threadbare carols; but as he is going to some of the very places they have fixed upon for the same time, they must change their route, for they must not have their good singing spoiled by his bawling gang being too near. While they are re-arranging their route, we will go and see what Mr. Jingle's company are doing. There they are, practising as hard as they can. True enough, they are a noisy lot, and, what is more, they are singing nothing but old pieces, which have been sung about the streets on Christmas mornings for the last twenty years. But they are perfectly satisfied with what they can do; and one consequential little gentleman of their number, who has heard Mr. Leader's new pieces, declares that, after all his trouble, he can produce nothing equal to these old carols. This little gentleman likes old-fashioned things to-night; but if we look at his dress next Sunday we will, perhaps, form a different opinion as to his taste and liking. But it is quite consistent for a young gentleman to like old-fashioned carols because he can sing no other, and to have a perfect mania about new-fashioned clothes. As they require some little rest before the commencement of the morning performance, we will leave them for the present, and take a stroll through the streets.

Crowds are moving up and down. Some are in the shops, buying in good things for to-morrow's feast; others have made their purchases, and are marching off home with their baskets, like laden bees in a summer's day; others have made their purchases, but are still looking round to see what can be seen, and are sometimes regretting that they have already bought what they can ill afford to purchase, as they see something they could like better. There are lots of boys, too, rambling about, buying nothing, because they have nothing wherewith to buy. Don't their mouths water when they look at cakes, apples, oranges, and other eatables in the shop windows? But several of them are, nevertheless, not without a prospect of having a share of some of these good things. Many of them have got tickets for some of the various tea parties which are to take place on the following day; and listen—they are telling each other what a *jolly good blow-out* they expect to have on the following afternoon. The streets gradually begin to get thinner, as knot after knot of stragglers begins to toddle off home, and at five minutes to twelve o'clock the streets seem to be comparatively still and deserted. The clatter of tongues and feet has ceased, and a solemn silence prevails, broken only now and then by a clear, shrill voice and a merry laugh, proceeding from some entry where a lot of juveniles are waiting the appearance of morning and the waits.

Suddenly the clock strikes twelve—nay, one it may be, for only the first stroke is heard, the remaining eleven being drowned by the louder and more harmonious sounds of a merry peal of bells, announcing to the inhabitants of the surrounding neighbourhood the return of the anniversary of that glorious morn when angels sang to the shepherds of Bethlehem that hope-inspiring anthem, "Glory to God in the highest, on earth peace and good will towards men." Who can listen to these sweet and mellow sounds, as they float on the breeze at this midnight hour, without feeling a sort of awe-inspiring sensation and holy joy. But, hark! What discordant sounds are those that jar upon the ear and destroy the effect of these melodious bells? Carol singers?—No. The clattering of the feet of a number of juveniles—a verse of some old carol sung by some of them—a wild hurrah—and uproarious laughter are mingled together in triumphant discord, and for a time drown every other more harmonious sound. They are rushing out of the various entries and passages into the street, where they expect some carol singers to commence. What do you say?—"They are not all boys; there are girls among them. What are their mothers doing to allow them to be out at this time of the night?" That is not so clear; but certain it is there are girls amongst them. Parental discipline is a little relaxed to-night, or we might well ask, what are either boys or girls doing out of their houses at this hour? The carol singers don't want them. They themselves are doing or learning little good, and the inhabitants of the neighbourhood would be glad not to be disturbed with their unpleasant noises.

But now their noise is hushed; the carol singers are out. They have come to a door and stopped. "Christians awake" is pealed forth with all their might. Then follows an anthem, and a *van-tan* at the door. The owner is a good-natured soul. He opens the door, lets them in, and gives them a shilling. But he does not stop here. They must have something to keep out the cold, and he has some pretty good *mountain dew*, which is the best thing possible for such a purpose, and he is so obliging as to hand over a bottle to their tender mercies. Having each had a draught, they give another specimen or two of their favourite pieces, and march off to another house. In the meantime, the next door neighbour, who belongs to another denomination, has been visited in a similar manner by another company of carol singer, whom he has treated in a somewhat similar manner. Mr. Leader's company next wait upon a gentleman who does not care much for waits, but is good-natured enough, as he has not gone to bed, to open the door, and give them a shilling. The next gentleman who is waited upon has gone to bed, but he gets up, opens the windows, and throws down half-a-crown. They now wait upon a gentleman who kindly opens the door and takes them inside. He has a good fire, and supplies them with bread and cheese and ale; but Mr. Baritone, who is cash keeper, has not had his purse made heavier in this dwelling. In the meantime, in the next street, a friend, who is expecting them, hearing singing, as he thinks, at his door, gets up out of bed, comes down stairs, and opens the door just in time to see the last of a company of carol singers belonging to another denomination go into his neighbour's house. He goes to bed in the huff at having got up for nothing, and when they do come an hour after, he is sound asleep and does not hear them. After leaving the house where they had the bread and cheese and ale, they come to another where the master is asleep. His wife hears them, and nudges him. "What's the matter, now?" says he. "There's a Christmas wait at the door." "Oh, then let them wait until they are tired," says he, and rolling over, he sets to work snoring as hard as ever, and they do wait until they are tired, and pack off elsewhere. The next call is upon a gentleman who they are sure will give them something handsome, as well as something to eat and drink. They sing their very newest piece, but ere they have time to commence a second, the window opens, and a shilling is thrown down with a request that, as the noise disturbs the baby, they will not sing any more. What a bore to call their singing a *noise*. Why it is really too bad. But it cannot be helped, so jog on. While they are busy singing for the next in their list, Mr. Jingle by accident has come to a house nearly opposite and sings one of his favourite old carols. Mr. Jingle gets taken in, while they sing until they are tired and no one looks out. This is

provoking. They therefore march off up street round the corner into the next street. Mr. Jingle comes out and passing down street round another corner comes into the same street and commences singing at the same time as they do. They are now persuaded that he is tracking them, and wishing through spite to spoil their work. Neither company get anything here, and go away, not in the best humour, to other places. It so happens again that they are close together, and the confusion from two separate pieces of music being sung at the same time in such close proximity is complete. Mr. Violin is strongly disposed to go and tell Mr. Jingle that if he continues this piece of impertinence he will give him a good sticking, not with his fiddle stick, but with a staff. He is, however, persuaded to take no notice of him, as he is not worth notice. But when they make their next move and both come to the same door they are obliged to enter into explanations. An angry altercation takes place, the result of which is, Mr. Jingle gives up the street to them and passes on into another. Mr. Leader and his company now march off, followed by only a few boys, for it is now four o'clock and most of them have tired and gone home, and begin to sing before a gentleman's house who has a very pretty servant maid; but this is more for the sake of serenading the servant girl than for the purpose of getting anything from the master or mistress, for Mr. Alto has a strong desire to make himself agreeable to this pretty damsel. The master of the house knows his voice, and to reward him for disturbing his rest, quietly opens the window and empties the wash basin on the heads of the musical party, which not only washes the head of Mr. Alto but spoils Mr. Violin's fiddle strings.

They are now disposed to think that they have had enough of waits for once, and so have I, and beg to wish you a merry Christmas and a happy new year, and make my exit.