

CHRISTMAS IN THE GERMAN FATHERLAND.

In the days of my youth it was my good fortune to have letters of introduction to some German friends of our family, and to be invited to spend the winter with them in their charming country house at the foot of the Riesengebirge.*

It was the 24th of December, and bitterly cold, when I emerged from the railway carriage upon the platform of a small country station, and was taken into friendly possession by a vivacious little dark-eyed baroness and her tall, flaxen-haired son, who, with many fears that I *must be nearly frozen* by my long journey from Berlin, wrapped me in an extra fur and supplied me with a third veil before allowing me to encounter the keen outer air and a long sledge drive.

To drive in a sledge at all was to me a novel and delightful experience, and the sledge to which I was now conducted was particularly pretty, with its body of light carved wood, its fur rugs lined with crimson, its pair of cream-coloured Russian ponies, with their harness studded with silver knobs, and arches of silver bells over their heads; and when once we were all warmly ensconced among the cushions and wrappers, and were gliding with noiseless swiftness over the well-kept sledge-way, it seemed to me that sledging was the very acme of luxurious motion, and I felt almost sorry when Baron Max checked his ponies to point out the high tower, now close at hand, which he said formed part of the main building of his home.

After passing through some fine pine-woods, we drove across the whilom moat, now planted with trees and called the Dark Walk, and, driving under a small archway, found ourselves in a spacious court laid out as a flower-garden, while facing us, and forming three sides of a hollow square, stood the schloss itself. The great entrance was approached by a long flight of steps, and upon these were several liveried servants awaiting our arrival, while at the sound of the sleigh-bells and the cracking of the driver's whip, two great wolfhounds rushed out to welcome their master, and were followed, more sedately, by the daughters of the house, who from their striking disparity in height were always known by the sobriquet of Tiny and Tall.

To Tiny's care I was immediately consigned, and, after a brief adjournment to my room, was led by her into the saloon, where we found Tall presiding over the coffee and cakes, which, as I discovered later on, she had herself prepared.

The Baroness had disappeared, leaving an apology for me that, as it was Christmas Eve, she had much to do, to which she must attend, and while we were waiting the signal to go and view the tree, Tiny and Tall proceeded to enlighten me as to many of their national customs in connection with this particular season.

In this village, for instance, as in many others of the Fatherland, and especially in Southern Germany, a veiled woman goes up and down the streets after nightfall, bearing in her arms a child chosen for his beauty and goodness to represent the Infant Saviour, and as they pass along they find the cottage windows discreetly left ajar, so that the Christ-child, as he is called, can leave upon the sill some token of the day. Every good child, upon awakening next morning, finds gifts—*oranges, sweeties, or some such things*; but, alas for the child who has been naughty! for him are no such delights; for him there lies

only a pliant willow or birchen rod, suggestive of the chastisement he deserves. Into the towns the Christ-child seldom comes; he is there replaced by the Christmas tree; and it was to decorate such a tree that the mother of the family had now disappeared.

The room in which I was hearing all this was large and lofty, lighted by five windows, the remaining walls being hung with ancestral portraits; for these unassuming, domesticated young girls were the descendants of a noble and historical line, would not have changed their ancient barony for a modern dukedom, and with pardonable pride showed me the family portraits, and gave me slight sketches concerning the originals. The most striking of these was certainly the full-length picture of that old field-marshal of whom Carlyle thus graphically writes:—"With regard to Friedrich, the court-martial needs no amendment from the King. The sentence on Friedrich, a lieutenant-colonel guilty of desertion, is from president and all members, except two, death as by law."

From this portrait we turned to that of Frederic the Great himself—his own gift to the family; from that prince the transition was easy to the subject of the Seven Years War, and we had begun planning excursions to the different battlefields when a bell began to ring, and changed the current of our thoughts.

We rushed down a long corridor, being joined as we went by different other members of the household, and reached the room from whence the blaze of light betrayed the presence of the great tree. It was, indeed, a giant, and formed a most imposing spectacle, as it stood in the centre of the large room, dazzling with variegated waxen tapers, shimmering all over with ice-like crystals, and decorated with gilded fruits and sweetmeats. The base of this wonderful member of the vegetable world was covered by a pyramid of the tempting confectionery and gingerbread peculiar to the province, and for which lots had afterwards to be drawn.

Round the room, and overshadowed by the mighty branches of the central tree, stood tiny specimens of the same tribe, each standing upon a table laden with gifts, and each destined for a separate member of the family and household.

Even I, stranger as I was, had my own little tree and table of presents—pieces of fine Silesian linen, a huge surprise ball,* and a pretty gold brooch, embossed with roses and forget-me-nots, which I cherish still in remembrance of my first happy visit to Germany. There were so many pretty things to admire, so many thanks to tender, so many good wishes to exchange, that it was growing quite late before we could make up our minds to leave these "halls of dazzling light" for the more prosaic supper-room.

Here—as in Germany the Eve is more celebrated (except as regards religious services) than the Christmas Day itself—we found the traditional dishes of Germany and of England. In honour of Germany I had to make acquaintance with real black bread—"Pumpernickel," as they call it in some parts of Germany; sauerkraut, and raw smoked ham, all of which at first I secretly thought odious, but eventually grew to like very much; and in honour of England we had plum pudding and mince pies—the former not at all badly

* A ball of this kind is a favourite gift in Germany. It looks like a very unskillfully-wound ball of knitting wool. You are bound in honour to knit it up, and as you do so you disclose, one by one, a variety of gifts, the most precious being generally the innermost of all.

cooked, the latter a dismal failure, as most English housewives will understand when I tell them that the cook, although adhering strictly to the proportions of an excellent recipe, had—for some extraordinary reasons of his own—pounded the whole into a paste, and enclosed it in a very thick crust, the shape and size of a small pork pie.

We did not linger long after supper; for it had been a long and fatiguing day for everyone. As for myself, after so many interesting and novel incidents, and so long and wearying a journey, I was only too glad to find myself once more in my own room, and I slept without pause or wakening until the appearance of the young ladies' maid, Amalia, at my bedside next morning with a cup of coffee and the intimation that it was now 7.30, and that the sledge for church-goers would be at the door at nine o'clock.

We were off punctually to the time, and after about half an hour's drive over the hard-frozen snow, upon which the brilliant sunshine was streaming down, we reached the unpretending-looking little Lutheran church. Here, as the due of the Adel,* we sat in a gallery all by ourselves, and had high-backed velvet chairs, surmounted by the baron's coronet, and with footstools embroidered to match; and very strange it seemed to me to be looking down from this pinnacle of isolated grandeur upon the poorer congregation below.

Generally speaking, these wore the costume of the province, and a charming costume too—a short skirt of red, green, or blue serge, with five broad bands of black velvet round the lower edge; black velvet bodice, laced over a full chemisette, and sleeves of white cambric; pointed velvet cap (of the Stuart shape), in colour matching the skirt, adorned with heavy gold braiding, and edged with a fluting of Silesian lace. Long gold earrings and a broad gold plaque, set with garnets and suspended by a slender chain round the neck, were the ornaments worn with this costume, and were, as I was afterwards told, handed down as family heirlooms from mother to child.

The dress of the men was, of course, less elaborate. It consisted of dark-blue or grey cloth suits, much adorned with silver buttons. Both men and women wore long black stockings and buckled shoes as part of their Sunday garb, but on weekdays generally go barefoot.

Those among the congregation who abjured these picturesque costumes and went in for modern fashion, wore—like the gentle folk—black; and I found to my astonishment that black was also *de rigueur* for Confirmation and the Holy Communion. The clergyman, a tall, kindly-looking old man, wore a long black gown and a wide box-pleated ruff. There was an ebony and silver crucifix upon the altar, which had lighted waxen tapers burning upon it. The musical part of the service was led by a full brass band; and, to complete my surprise, I found it was against rule to kneel at any time; one either sat or stood.

All this seemed so utterly at variance with recognised ideas in England upon the same subject, that I am afraid I did not much profit by my first church-going in the Fatherland. Still, it was an interesting experience, and when time had familiarised me more with both the language and the customs, I found a great deal that I could honestly admire, though I never ceased to prefer our own bright and beautiful Liturgy to the somewhat ponderous nature of worship in the Fatherland.

* Nobility.

* A lofty chain of mountains lying to the south of the province of Silesia.