THE CHRISTMAS KALENDS OF PROVENCE.

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WITH PICTURES BY LOUIS LOEB.

FANCY you 've journeyed down the Rhône,
Fancy you 've passed Vienne, Valence,
Fancy you 've skirted Avignon—
And so are come *en pleine* Provence.

Fancy a mistral cutting keen
Across the sunlit wintry fields,
Fancy brown vines, and olives green,
And blustered, swaying cypress shields.

Fancy a widely opened door,
Fancy an eager outstretched hand,
Fancy—nor need you ask for more—
A heart-sped welcome to our land.

Fancy the peal of Christmas chimes,
Fancy that some long-buried year
Is born again of ancient times—
And in Provence take Christmas cheer.

I.

IN my own case, this journey and this welcome were not fancies but realities. I had come to keep Christmas with my friend M. de Vièlmur according to the traditional Provençal rites and ceremonies in his own entirely Provençal home: an ancient dwelling which stands high up on the westward slope of the Alpilles, overlooking Arles and Tarascon and within sight of Avignon, near the Rhône margin of Provence.

The Vidame—such is M. de Vièlmur's ancient title, derived originally not from a minor overlord but directly from the sovereign counts of Provence—is an old-school country gentleman who is amiably at odds with modern times. While tolerant of those who have yielded to the new order, he himself is a great stickler for the preservation of antique forms and ceremonies; sometimes, indeed, pushing his fancies to lengths that fairly would lay him open to the charge of whimsicality, were not even the most extravagant of his crotchets touched and mellowed by his natural goodness of heart.

The château of Vièlmur has remained so intimately a part of the middle ages that the subtle essence of that romantic period still pervades it, and gives to all that goes on there a quaintly archaic tone. The donjon, a prodigiously strong square tower dating from the twelfth century, partly is surrounded by a dwelling in the florid style of two hundred years back, the architectural flippancies of which have been so tousled by time and weather as to give it the look of an old beau caught unawares by age and grizzled in the midst of his affected youth.

In the rear of these oddly coupled structures is a farm-house with a dependent rambling collection of farm-buildings, the whole inclosing a large open court to which access is had by a vaulted passageway that on occasion may be closed by a double set of ancient iron-clamped doors. As the few exterior windows of the farm-house are grated heavily, and as from each of the rear corners of the square there projects a crusty tourelle from which a raking fire could be kept up along the walls, the place has quite the air of a testy little fortress—and a fortress it was meant to be when it was built three hundred years ago (the date, 1561, is carved on the keystone of the arched entrance) in the time of the religious wars.

But now the iron-clamped doors stand open on rusty hinges, and the courtyard has that look of placid cheerfulness which goes with the varied peaceful activities of farm labor and farm life. Chickens and ducks wander about it chattering complacently, an aged goat of a melancholy humor stands usually in one corner lost in misanthropic thought, and a great flock of extraordinarily tame pigeons flutters back and forth between the stone dovecote rising in a square tower above the farm-house and the farm well.

This well—inclosed in a stone building surmounted by a very ancient crucifix—is in the center of the courtyard, and it also is the center of a little domestic world. To its curb come the farm animals three times daily; while as frequently, though less regularly, most of

the members of the two households come there too; and there do the humans—notably, I have observed, if they be of different sexes—find it convenient to rest for a while together and take a dish of friendly talk. From the low-toned chattering and the soft laughter that I have heard now and then of an evening I have inferred that these nominally chance encounters are not confined wholly to the day.

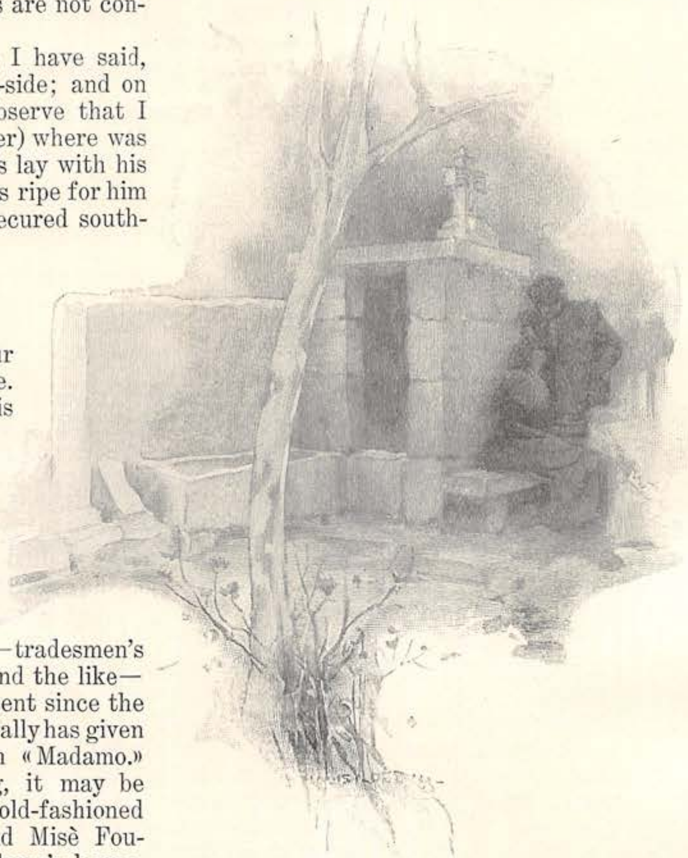
The château stands, as I have said, well up on the mountain-side; and on the very spot (I must observe that I am here quoting its owner) where was the camp in which Marius lay with his legions until the time was ripe for him to strike the blow that secured southern Gaul to Rome.

II.

In the dominion of Vièlmur there is an inner empire. Nominally, the Vidame is the reigning sovereign; but the power behind his throne is Misè Fougueiroun. The term «Misè» is an old-fashioned Provençal title of respect for women of the little bourgeoisie—tradesmen's and shopkeepers' wives and the like—that has become obsolescent since the Revolution and very generally has given place to the fine-ladyish «Madamo.» With a little stretching, it may be rendered by our English old-fashioned title of «Mistress»; and Misè Fougueiroun, who is the Vidame's housekeeper, is mistress over his household in a truly masterful way.

This personage is a little round woman, still plumply pleasing, although she is rising sixty, who is arrayed always with an exquisite neatness in the dress—the sober black and white of the elder women, not the gay colors worn by the young girls—of the Pays d'Arles; and although shortness and plumpness are at odds with majesty of deportment she has, at least, the peremptory manner of one long accustomed to command.

By my obviously sincere admiration of the château and its surroundings, and by a discreet word or two implying a more personal admiration,—a tribute which no woman of the Pays d'Arles ever is too old to accept graciously as her due,—I was so fortunate as to win Misè Fougueiroun's favor at the outset; a fact of which I was apprised on the evening of my arrival—it was at dinner, and the housekeeper herself had brought in a bottle of precious Château-neuf-du-Pape—by the cordiality with which she joined forces with the Vidame in reprobating my belated coming to the château. Actually, I was near



DRAWN BY LOUIS LOEB.

AT THE WELL.

a fortnight behind the time named in my invitation, which had stated expressly that Christmas began in Provence on the feast of Saint Barbara, and that I was expected not later than that day—December 4.

«Monsieur should have been here,» said the housekeeper with decision, «when we planted the blessed Saint Barbara's grain. And now it is grown a full span. Monsieur will not see Christmas at all!»

But my apologetic explanation that I never even had heard of Saint Barbara's grain only made my case the more deplorable.

«Mai!» exclaimed Misè Fougueiroun, in the tone of one who faces suddenly a real calamity. «Can it be that there are no

Christians in Monsieur's America? Is it possible that down there they do not keep the Christmas feast at all?»

To cover my confusion, the Vidame intervened with an explanation which made America appear in a less heathenish light. «The planting of Saint Barbara's grain,» he said, «is a custom that I think is peculiar to the south of France. In almost every household in Provence, and over in Languedoc too, on Saint Barbara's day the women fill two, sometimes three, plates with wheat or lentils, which they set afloat in water and then stand in the warm ashes of the fireplace or on a sunny window-ledge to germinate. This is done in order to foretell the harvest of the coming year, for as Saint Barbara's grain grows well or ill so will the harvest of the coming year be good or bad; and also that there may be on the table when the Great Supper is served on Christmas eve—that is to say, on the feast of the winter solstice—green growing grain in symbol or in earnest of the harvest of the new year that then begins.

«The association of the Trinitarian Saint Barbara with this custom,» the Vidame continued, «I fear is a bit of makeshift. Were three plates of grain the rule, something of a case would be made out in her favor. But the rule, so far as one can be found, is for only two. The custom must be of pagan origin, and therefore dates from far back of the time when Saint Barbara lived in her three-windowed tower at Heliopolis. Probably her name was tagged to it because of old these votive and prophetic grain-fields were sown on what in Christian times became her dedicated day. But whatever light-mannered goddess may have been their patroness then, she is their patroness now; and from their sowing we date the beginning of our Christmas feast.»

It was obvious that this explanation of the custom went much too far for Misè Fougueiroun. At the mention of its foundation in paganism she sniffed audibly, and upon the Vidame's reference to the light-mannered goddess she drew her ample skirts primly about her and left the room.

The Vidame smiled. «I have scandalized Misè, and to-morrow I shall have to listen to a lecture,» he said; and in a moment continued: «It is not easy to make our Provençaux realize how closely we are linked to older peoples and to older times. The very name for Christmas in Provençal, Calèndo, tells how this Christian festival lives on from the Roman festival of the winter solstice, the January Kalends; and the beliefs and customs which go with its celebration still more plainly mark its origin.»

III.

In the early morning a lively clatter rising from the farm-yard came through my open window, along with the sunshine and the crisp freshness of the morning air.

In the courtyard there was more than the ordinary morning commotion of farm life, and the buzz of talk going on at the well and the racing and shouting of a parcel of children all had in it a touch of eagerness and expectancy. While I still was drinking my coffee—in the excellence and delicate service of which I recognized the friendly hand of Misè Fougueiroun—there came a knock at my door, and, upon my answer, the Vidame entered, looking so elate and wearing so blithe an air that he easily might have been mistaken for a frolicsome middle-aged sunbeam.

«Hurry! Hurry!» he cried, while still shaking both my hands. «This is a day of days—we are going now to bring home the *cacho-fiò*, the Yule log! Put on a pair of heavy shoes—the walking is rough on the mountain-side. But be quick, and come down the moment that you are ready. Now I must be off. There is a world for me to do.»

When I went down-stairs, five minutes later, I found him standing in the hall by the open doorway. «Come along!» he cried. «They all are waiting for us at the Mazet,» and he hurried me down the steps to the terrace and so around to the rear of the château, talking away eagerly as we walked.

«It is a most important matter,» he said, «this bringing home of the *cacho-fiò*. The whole family must take part in it. The head of the family—the grandfather, the father, or the eldest son—must cut the tree; all the others must share in carrying home the log that is to make the Christmas fire. And the tree must be a fruit-bearing tree. With us it usually is an almond or an olive. The olive especially is sacred. Our people, getting their faith from their Greek ancestors, believe that lightning never strikes it. But an apple-tree or a pear-tree will serve the purpose, and up in the Alp region they burn the acorn-bearing oak. What we shall do to-day is an echo of Druidical ceremonial—of the time when the Druid priests cut the Yule oak and with their golden sickles reaped the sacred mistletoe; but old Jan here, who is so stiff for preserving ancient customs, does not know that this custom, like many others that he stands for, is the survival of a rite.»

While the Vidame was speaking we had

turned from the terrace and were nearing the Mazet—which diminutive of the Provençal word *mas*, meaning farm-house, is applied to the farm establishment at Vièlmur partly in friendliness and partly in indication of its dependence upon the great house, the château. At the arched entrance we found the farm family awaiting us: Old Jan, the steward of the estate, and his wife Elizo; Marius, their elder son, a man over forty, who is the active manager of affairs; their younger son Esperit, and their daughter Nanoun; and the wife of Marius, Janetoun, to whose skirts a small child was clinging while three or four larger children scampered about her in a whir of excitement over the imminent event by which Christmas really would be ushered in.

When my presentation had been accomplished we set off across the home vineyard, and thence upward through the olive-orchards, to the high region on the mountain-side where grew the almond-tree which the Vidame and his steward in counsel together had selected for the Christmas sacrifice.

Nanoun, a strapping red-cheeked, black-haired bounce of twenty, ran back into the Mazet as we started, and joined us again, while we were crossing the vineyard, bringing with her a gentle-faced fair girl of her own age, who came shyly. The Vidame, calling her Magali, had a cordial word for this newcomer, and nudged me to bid me mark how promptly Esperit was by her side. «It is as good as settled,» he whispered. «They have been lovers since they were children. Magali is the daughter of Elizo's foster-sister, who died when the child was born. Then Elizo brought her home to the Mazet, and there she has lived her whole life long. Esperit is waiting only until he shall be established in the world to speak the word. And the scamp is in a hurry. Actually, he is pestering me to put him at the head of the Lower Farm!»

The Vidame gave this last piece of information in a tone of severity; but there was a twinkle in his kind old eyes as he spoke which led me to infer that Master Esperit's chances for the stewardship of the Lower Farm were anything but desperate, and I noticed that from time to time he cast very friendly glances toward these young lovers, as our little procession, mounting the successive terraces, went through the olive-orchards along the hillside upward.

Presently we were grouped around the devoted almond-tree, a gnarled old personage, of a great age and girth, having that pathetic look of sorrowful dignity which I find always in superannuated trees, and now and then in people of gentle natures who are conscious that their days of usefulness are gone.

Even the children were quiet as old Jan took his place beside the tree, and there was a touch of solemnity in his manner as he swung his heavy ax and gave the first strong blow, that sent a shiver through all the branches, as though the tree realized that death had overtaken it at last. When he had slashed a dozen times into the trunk, making a deep gash in the pale red wood beneath the brown bark, he handed the ax to Marius, and stood watching silently with the rest of us while his son finished the work that he had begun. In a few minutes the tree tottered, and then fell with a growling death-cry, as its brittle old branches crashed upon the ground.

Whatever there had been of unconscious reverence in the silence that attended the felling was at an end. As the tree came down everybody shouted. Instantly the children were swarming all over it. In a moment our little company burst into the flood of loud and lively talk that is inseparable in Provence from gay occasions, and that is ill held in check even at funerals and in church. They are the merriest people in the world, the Provençaux.

IV.

MARIUS completed his work by cutting through the trunk again, making a noble cacho-fiò near five feet long—big enough to burn, according to the Provençal rule, from Christmas eve until the evening of New Year's day.

We returned homeward, moving in a mildly triumphal procession that I felt to be a little tinctured with ceremonial practices come down from forgotten times. Old Jan and Marius marching in front, Esperit and the sturdy Nanoun marching behind, carried between them the Yule log slung to shoulder-poles.

Our procession took on grand proportions, I should explain, because our Yule log was of extraordinary size. But always the Yule log is brought home in triumph. If it is small, it is carried on the shoulder of the father or the eldest son; if of a goodly size, these two carry it together; or a young husband and wife may bear it between them—as we actually saw a thick branch of our almond borne away that afternoon—while their children caracole around them or lend little helping hands.

Being come to the Mazet, the log was stood

on end in the courtyard in readiness to be taken thence to the fireplace on Christmas eve. I fancied that the men handled it with a certain reverence; and the Vidame assured me that such actually was the case. Already, being fully destined for the Christmas rite, it had become in a way sacred; and along with its sanctity, according to the popular belief, it had acquired a power which enabled it sharply to resent anything that smacked of sacrilegious affront.

DRAWN BY LOUIS LOEB.

BRINGING HOME THE «CACHO-FIÒ» (YULE LOG).

On the other hand, when treated reverently and burned with fitting rites, the Yule log brings upon all the household a blessing; and when it has been consumed even its ashes are potent for good.

The home-bringing ceremony being thus ended, we walked back to the château together—startling Esperit and Magali standing hand in hand, lover-like, in the archway; and when we were come to the terrace, and were seated snugly in a sunny corner, the Vidame told me of a very stately Yule log gift that was made anciently in Aix—and very likely elsewhere also—in feudal times.

In Aix it was the custom, when the counts of Provence still lived and ruled there, for the magistrates of the city each year at Christmas-tide to carry in solemn procession a huge cacho-fiò to the palace of their sovereign; and there formally to present to him—or, in his absence, to the grand seneschal on his behalf—this their free-will and good-will offering. And when the ceremony of presentation was ended the city fathers were served with a collation at the count's charges, and were given the opportunity to pledge him loyally in his own good wine.

Knowing Aix well, I was able to fill in the outlines of the Vidame's bare statement of fact, and also to give it a background. What a joy the procession must have been to see! The gray-bearded magistrates, in their velvet caps and robes, wearing their golden chains of office; the great log, swung to shoulder-poles and borne by leathern-jerkined henchmen; surely drummers and fifers, for such a ceremonial would have been impossibly incomplete in Provence without a *tambourin* and *galoubet;* doubtless a brace of ceremonial trumpeters; and a seemly guard in front and rear of steel-capped and steel-jacketed halberdiers. All these marching gallantly through the narrow, yet stately, Aix streets; with comfortable burghers and well-rounded matrons in the doorways looking on, and pretty faces peeping from upper windows and going all a-blushing because of the overbold glances of the men-at-arms! And then fancy the presentation in the great hall of the castle; and the gay feasting; and the merry wagging of gray-bearded chins as the magistrates cried all together, «To the health of the count!» and tossed their wine!

DRAWN BY LOUIS LOEB.

«TO THE HEALTH OF THE COUNT!»

V.

As Christmas day drew near I observed that Misè Fougueiroun walked thoughtfully and seemed to be oppressed by heavy cares. It was the same just then with all the housewives of the region; for the chief ceremonial event of Christmas in Provence is the *Gros Soupa* that is eaten upon Christmas eve, and of even greater culinary importance is the dinner that is eaten upon Christmas day—wherefore does every woman brood and labor that her achievement of these meals may realize her high ideal. Especially does the preparation of the Great Supper compel exhaustive thought. Being of a vigil, the supper necessarily is «lean,» and custom has fixed unalterably the principal dishes of which it must be composed. Thus limited straitly, the making of it becomes a struggle of genius against material conditions.

Because of the Vidame's desolate bachelorhood, the kindly custom long ago was established that he and all his household every year should eat their Great Supper with the farm family at the Mazet—an arrangement that did not work well until Misè Fougueiroun and Elizo (after some years of spirited squabbling) came to the agreement that the former should be permitted to prepare the delicate sweets served for dessert at that repast. Of these the most important is *nougat*, without which Christmas would be as barren in Provence as Christmas would be in England without plum-pudding or in America without mince-pies.

But it was the making of the Christmas dinner that mainly occupied Misè Fougueiroun's mind—a feast pure and simple, governed by the one jolly law that it shall be the very best dinner of the whole year. What may be termed its by-laws are that the principal dish shall be a roast turkey, and that nougat and *poumpo* shall figure at the dessert. Why poumpo is held in high esteem by the Provençaux I am not prepared to say. It seemed to me a cake of only a humdrum quality; but even Misè Fougueiroun spoke of it in a sincerely admiring and chop-smacking way.

Ordinarily the Provençal Christmas turkey is roasted with a stuffing of chestnuts, or of sausage-meat and black olives; but the high cooks of Provence also roast him stuffed with truffles, making so superb a dish that Brillat-Savarin has singled it out for praise.

Of the minor dishes served at the Christmas dinner it is needless to speak. There was nothing ceremonial about them; nothing remarkable except their excellence and their profusion. Indeed, the distinctiveness of a Provençal Christmas—unless the New-Year ceremonial be considered as a part of it—ends on Christmas eve with the midnight mass.

VI.

But in spite of their eager natural love for all good things eatable, the Provençaux also are poets, and along with the cooking, another matter was in train that was wholly of a poetic cast. This was the making of the *crèche*, a representation with odd little figures and accessories of the personages and scene of the Nativity, the whole at once so naïve and so tender as to be possible only among a people blessed with rare sweetness and rare simplicity of soul.

In a way, the crèche takes in Provence the place of the Christmas tree, of which Northern institution nothing is known here; but it is closer to the heart of Christmas than the tree, being touched with a little of the tender beauty of the event which it represents in so quaint a guise. Its invention is ascribed to Saint Francis of Assisi. The chronicle of his order tells that this seraphic man, having first obtained the permission of the holy see, represented the principal scenes of the Nativity in a stable, and that in the stable so transformed he celebrated mass and preached to the people. All this is wholly in keeping with the character of Saint Francis; and certainly the crèche had its origin in Italy in his period, and in the same conditions which formed his graciously fanciful soul. Its introduction into Provence is said to have been in the time of John XXII, the second of the Avignon popes, who came to the pontificate in the year 1316, and by the fathers of the Oratory of Marseille: from which center it rapidly spread abroad through the land until it became a necessary feature of the Christmas festival both in churches and in homes.

Obviously, the crèche is an offshoot from the miracle-plays and mysteries which had their beginning a full two centuries earlier. These also survive vigorously in Provence in the «Pastouralo,» an acted representation of the Nativity that is given each year during the Christmas season by amateurs or professionals in every city and town and in almost every village.

In the farm-houses, and in the dwellings of the middle class, the crèche is placed always in the living-room, and so becomes an intimate part of the family life. On a table set in a corner is represented a rocky hillside rising in terraces tufted with moss and grass and

DRAWN BY LOUIS LOEB.

THE BLIND GIRL.

(SEE PAGES 262 AND 283.)

little trees, and broken by foot-paths and a winding road. This structure is very like a Provençal hillside, but it is supposed to represent the rocky region around Bethlehem, and it is dusted with flour to represent snow. At its base, on the left, embowered in laurel or in holly, is a wooden or pasteboard representation of the inn; and beside the inn is the stable: an open shed in which are grouped little figures representing the several personages of the Nativity. In the center is the Christ-child, either in a cradle or lying on a truss of straw; seated beside him is the Virgin; Saint Joseph stands near, holding in his hand the mystic lily; with their heads bent down over the Child are the ox and the ass —for those good animals helped with their breath through that cold night to keep him warm. In the foreground are the two *ravi*— a man and a woman in awed ecstasy, with upraised arms—and the adoring shepherds. To these are added on Epiphany the figures of the Magi—the kings, as they are called always in French and in Provençal—with their train of attendants, and the camels on which they have brought their gifts. Angels (pendent from the farm-house ceiling) float in the air above the stable. Higher is the star, from which a ray (a golden thread) descends to the Christ-child's hand. Over all, in a glory of clouds, is the figure of Jehovah attended by a white dove.

These are the essentials of the crèche, and in the beginning, no doubt, these made the whole of it. But for nearly six centuries the delicate imagination of the Provençal poets and the cruder, but still poetic, fancy of the Provençal people have been enlarging upon the simple original—with the result that twoscore or more figures often are found in the crèche of to-day.

Either drawing from the quaintly beautiful medieval legends of the birth and childhood of Jesus, or directly from their own quaintly simple souls, the poets from early times have been making Christmas songs— noëls, or *nouvè* as they are called in Provençal—in which new subordinate characters have been created in a spirit of frank realism, and these have materialized in new figures surrounding the crèche. At the same time the fancy of the people, working with a still more naïve directness along the lines of associated ideas, has been making the most curiously incongruous and anachronistic additions to the group.

To the first order belong such creations as the blind man, led by a child, coming to be healed of his blindness by the Infant's touch; or that of the young mother hurrying to offer her breast to the New-born (in accordance with the beautiful custom still in force in Provence), that its own mother may rest a little before she begins to suckle it; or that of the other mother bringing the cradle of which her own baby has been dispossessed, because of her compassion for the poor woman at the inn whose Child is lying on a truss of straw.

But the popular additions, begotten of association of ideas, are far more numerous and also are far more curious. The hilltop, close under the floating figure of Jehovah, has been crowned with a windmill, because windmills abounded anciently on the hilltops of Provence; and to the mill, naturally, has been added a miller who is riding down the road on an ass with a sack of flour across his saddle-bow that he is carrying as a gift to the Holy Family. The adoring shepherds have been given flocks of sheep, and on the hillside more shepherds and more sheep have been put for company. The sheep, in association with the ox and the ass, have brought in their train a whole troop of domestic animals—including geese and turkeys and chickens and a cock on the roof of the stable; and in the train of the camels has come the extraordinary addition of lions, bears, leopards, elephants, ostriches, and even crocodiles! The Provençaux being from of old mighty hunters (the tradition has found its classic embodiment in Tartarin), and hillsides being appropriate to hunting, the figure of a fowler with a gun at his shoulder has been introduced; and as it is well, even in the case of a Provençal sportsman, to point a gun at a definite object, the fowler usually is so placed as to aim at the cock on the stable roof. He is a modern, yet not very recent, addition, the fowler, as is shown by the fact that he carries a flint-lock fowling-piece. Drumming and fifing being absolute essentials to every sort of Provençal festivity, a conspicuous figure always is found playing on a tambourin and galoubet. Itinerant knife-grinders are an old institution here, and in some obscure way— possibly because of their thievish propensities—are associated intimately with the devil; and so there is either a knife-grinder simple, or a devil with a knife-grinder's wheel. Of old it was the custom for the women to carry distaffs and to spin out thread as they went to and from the fields or along the roads (just as the women nowadays knit as they walk), and therefore a spinning-woman always is of the company. Because child-stealing was not uncommon

here formerly, and because Gipsies still are plentiful, there are three Gipsies lurking about the inn all ready to steal the Christ-child away. As the innkeeper naturally would come out to investigate the cause of the commotion in his stable-yard, he is found with the others, lantern in hand. And, finally, there is a group of women bearing as gifts to the Christ-child the essentials of the Christmas feast: codfish, chickens, *carde*, ropes of garlic, eggs, and the great Christmas cakes, poumpo and *fougasso*.

Many other figures may be, and often are, added to the group, of which one of the most delightful is the Turk who makes a solacing present of his pipe to Saint Joseph. But all of these which I have named have come to be now quite as necessary to a properly made crèche as are the few which are taken direct from the Bible narrative; and the congregation surely is one of the quaintest that ever poetry and simplicity together devised.

VII.

On the morning of the day preceding Christmas a lurking, yet ill-repressed, excitement pervaded the château and all its dependencies. In the case of the Vidame and Misè Fougueiroun the excitement did not even lurk: it blazed forth so openly that they were as a brace of comets—bustling violently through our universe and dragging into their erratic wakes, away from normal orbits, the whole planetary system of the household and all haply intrusive stars.

Although the morning still was young, work on the estate had ended for the day, and about the door of the kitchen more than a score of laborers were gathered.

Misè Fougueiroun—a plump embodiment of Benevolence—stood beside a table on which was a great heap of her own fougasso, and big baskets filled with dried figs and almonds and celery, and a genial battalion of bottles standing guard over all. One by one the vassals were called up—there was a strong flavor of feudalism in it all—and to each, while the Vidame wished him a «Bòni fèsto!» the housekeeper gave his Christmas portion: a fougasso, a double handful each of figs and almonds, a stalk of celery, and a bottle of *vin cue*, the cordial that is used for the libation of the Yule log and for the solemn Yule cup; and each, as he received his portion, made his little speech of friendly thanks—in several cases most gracefully turned—and then was off in a hurry for his home.

VIII.

As we passed the Mazet in our afternoon walk we stopped to greet the new arrivals there, come to make the family gathering complete: two more married children, with a flock of their own little ones, and Elizo's father and mother—a bowed little rosy-cheeked old woman and a bowed lean old man, both well above eighty years. There was a lively passage of friendly greetings between them all and the Vidame; and it was quite delightful to see how the bowed little old woman kindled and bridled when the Vidame gallantly protested that she grew younger and handsomer every year.

A tall ladder stood against the Mazet, and the children were engaged in hanging tiny wheat-sheaves along the eaves—the Christmas portion of the birds.

IX.

Our march, out through the rear door of the château and across the courtyard to the Mazet, was processional. All the household went with us. The Vidame gallantly gave his arm to Misè Fougueiroun; I followed with her first officer, a saucebox named Mouneto, so plumply provoking and charming in her Arlesian dress that I will not say what did or did not happen in the darkness as we passed the well! A little in our rear followed the house servants, even to the least; and in the Mazet already were gathered, with the family, the few work-people of the estate who had not gone to their own homes. For the Great Supper is a patriarchal feast, to which in Christian fellowship come the master and the master's family and all of their servitors and dependents on equal terms.

A broad stream of light came out through the open doorway of the farm-house, and with it a great clatter and buzz of talk, that increased tenfold as we entered, and a cry of «Bòni fèsto!» came from the whole company at once. As for the Vidame, he so radiated cordiality that he seemed to be the veritable spirit of Christmas (incarnate at the age of sixty, and at that period of the present century when stocks and frilled shirts were worn), and his joyful old legs were near to dancing as he went among the company with warm-hearted greetings and outstretched hands.

X.

The crèche, around which the children were gathered in a swarm, was built up in one

DRAWN BY LOUIS LOEB.

MAGALI.

(SEE PAGE 281.)

corner, and our coming was the signal for the first of the ceremonies, the lighting of the crèche candles, to begin. In this all the children had a part, making rather a scramble of it; for there was rivalry as to which of them should light the most, and in a moment a constellation of little flames covered the Bethlehem hillside and brought into bright prominence the Holy Family and its strange attendant host of quite impossible people and beasts and birds.

The laying of the Yule log followed—a ceremony so grave that it has all the dignity of, and really is, a religious rite. The buzz of talk died away into silence as Elizo's father, the oldest man, took by the hand and led out into the courtyard where the log was lying his great-grandson, the little Tounin, the youngest child: it being the rule that the nominal bearers of the cacho-fiò to the hearth shall be the oldest and the youngest of the family—the one personifying the year that is dying, the other the year new-born. Sometimes, and this is the prettiest rendering of the custom, the two are an old, old man and a baby carried in its mother's arms, while between them the real bearers of the burden walk.

In our case the log actually was carried by Marius and Esperit; but the tottering old man clasped its forward end with his thin, feeble hands, and its hinder end was clasped by the plump, feeble hands of the tottering child. Thus, the four together, they brought it in through the doorway and carried it thrice around the room, circling the supper-table and the lighted candles; and then, reverently, it was laid before the fireplace, that still sometimes is called in Provençal the *lar*.

There was a pause, while the old man filled out a cup of vin cue, and a solemn hush fell upon the company, and all heads were bowed, as he poured three libations upon the log, saying with the last: «In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Ghost!» and then cried with all the vigor that he could infuse into his thin and quavering old voice:

Cacho-fiò,
Bouto-fiò!
Alègre! Alègre!
Dièu nous alègre!
Calèndo vèn! Tout bèn vèn!
Dièu nous fague la gràci de vèire l'an que vèn,
E se noun sian pas mai, que noun fuguen pas mens!

Yule log,
Catch fire!
Joy! Joy!
God gives joy!
Christmas comes! All good comes!
May God give us grace to see the coming year,
And if we are not more, may we not be less!

As he ended his invocation he crossed himself, as did all the rest; and a great glad shout was raised of «Alègre! Alègre!» as Marius and Esperit, first casting some fagots of vine-branches on the bed of glowing coals, placed the Yule log upon the fire. Instantly the vines blazed up, flooding the room with brightness; and as the Yule log glowed and reddened everybody cried:

Cacho-fiò,
Bouto-fiò!
Alègre! Alègre!

again and again—as though the whole of them together of a sudden had gone merry-mad!

In the midst of this triumphant rejoicing the bowl from which the libation had been poured was filled afresh with vin cue, and was passed from hand to hand and lip to lip,—beginning with the little Tounin, and so upward in order of seniority until it came last of all to the old man,—and from it each drank to the new fire of the new year.

One of my Aix friends, the poet Joachim Gasquet, has described to me the Christmas-eve customs which were observed in his own home: the Gasquet bakery, in the Rue de la Cépède, that has been handed down from father to son through so many hundreds of years that even its owners cannot tell certainly whether it was in the fourteenth or the fifteenth century that their family legend of good baking had its rise.

In the Gasquet family it was the custom to eat the Great Supper in the oven-room: because that was the heart, the sanctuary, of the house; the place consecrated by the toil which gave the family its livelihood. On the supper-table there was always a wax figure of the infant Christ, and this was carried just before midnight to the living-room, off from the shop, in one corner of which the crèche was set up. It was the little Joachim whose right it was, because he was the youngest, the purest, to carry the figure. A formal procession was made. He walked at its head, a little chap with long curling golden hair, between his two grandfathers; the rest followed in the order of their age and rank: his two grandmothers, his father and mother, Monsieur Auguste (a dashing blade of a young baker then) with the maid-servant, and the apprentices last of all. A single candle was carried by one of his grandfathers into the dark room—the illumination of which, that

DRAWN BY LOUIS LOEB.

AT THE STROKE OF MIDNIGHT.

night, could come only from the new fire kindled before the crèche. Precisely at midnight—at the moment when all the clocks of Aix striking together let loose the Christmas chimes—the child laid the holy figure in the manger, and then the candles instantly were set ablaze.

Sometimes there would be a thrilling pause of half a minute or more while they waited for the bells: the child, with the image in his hands, standing before the crèche in the little circle of light; the others grouped behind him, and for the most part lost in dark shadow cast by the single candle held low down; those

nearest to the crèche holding matches ready to strike so that all the candles might be lighted at once when the moment came. And then all the bells together would send their voices out over the city heavenward; and his mother would say softly, «Now, my little son!» and the room would flash into brightness suddenly—as though a glory radiated from the Christ-child lying there in the manger between the ox and the ass.

DRAWN BY LOUIS LOEB.

«ELIZO'S OLD FATHER.»

XI.

WHILE our Yule-log ceremonial was in progress, the good Elizo and Janetoun, upon whom the responsibility of the supper rested, evidently were a prey to anxious thoughts. They whispered together, and cast uneasy glances toward the chimney, into the broad corners of which the various cooking-vessels had been moved to make way for the cacho-fiò; and barely had the cup of benediction passed their lips when they precipitated themselves upon the fireplace, and replaced the pots and pans for a final heating upon the coals.

The long table had been set before our arrival and was in perfect readiness, covered with a fine white linen cloth, sacredly reserved for use at high festivals, that fairly sparkled in the blaze of light cast by the overhanging petroleum lamp. Yet the two ceremonial candles, one at each end of the table, also were lighted.

Beside these candles were the harvest harbingers, the plates on which was growing Saint Barbara's grain, so vigorous and so freshly green that old Jan rubbed his hands together comfortably as he said to the Vidame, «Ah, we need have no fears for the harvest that is coming in this blessed year!» In the center of the table, its browned crust slashed with a cross, was the great loaf of Christmas bread, *pan Calendau;* on which was a bunch of holly tied with the white pith of rushes—the «marrow» of the rush, that is held to be an emblem of strength. Old Jan,

the master of the house, cut the loaf into as many portions as there were persons present, with one double portion over to be given to some poor one in charity—«the portion of the good God.» It is of a miraculous nature, this blessed bread: the sailors of Provence carry morsels of it with them on their voyages, and by strewing its crumbs upon the troubled waters stay the tempests of the sea.

For the rest, the table had down its middle a line of dishes—many of them old faïence of Moustiers, the mere sight of which would have thrilled a collector's heart—heaped with the nougat and the other sweets over the making of which our housekeeper and her lieutenants so soulfully had toiled. And on the table in the corner were fruits and nuts and wines.

Grace always is said before the Great Supper—a simple formula ending with the prayer of the Yule log that if another year there are no more, there may be no less. It is the custom that this blessing shall be asked by the youngest child of the family who can speak the words—a pretty usage which sometimes makes the blessing go very queerly indeed. Our little Tounin came to the front again in this matter, exhibiting an air of grave responsibility which showed that he had been well drilled; and it was with quite a saintly look on his little face that he folded his hands together and said very earnestly: «God bless all that we are going to eat, and if we are no less next year, may we be no more!» at which everybody looked at Janetoun and laughed.

In our seating a due order of precedence was observed. Old Jan, the head of the family, presided, with the Vidame and myself on his right and with Elizo's father and mother on his left; and thence the company went downward by age and station to the foot of the table, where were grouped the servants from the château and the workmen on the farm. But no other distinction was made. All were served alike and all drank together as equals when the toasts were called. The servers were Elizo and Janetoun, with Nanoun and Magali for assistants; and these four, although they took their places at the table when each course had been brought on, had rather a Passover time of it: for they ate, as it were, with their loins girded and with full or empty dishes imminent to their hands.

As I have said, the Great Supper must be «lean,» and is restricted to certain dishes which in no circumstances can be changed; but rich leanness is possible in a country where olive-oil takes the place of animal fat in cooking, and where the accumulated skill of ages presides over the kitchen fire. The principal dish is the *raïto*—a ragout made of delicately fried fish served in a sauce flavored with wine and capers—whereof the tradition goes back around twenty-five hundred years, to the time when the Phocæan housewives brought with them to Massalia (the Marseille of to-day) the happy mystery of its making from their Grecian homes. But this excellent dish was not lost to Greece because it was gained by Gaul: bearing the same name, and made in the same fashion, it is eaten by the Greeks of the present day. It usually is made of dried codfish in Provence, where the cod is held in high esteem; but is most delicately toothsome when made of eels.

The second course of the Great Supper also is fish, which may be of any sort and served in any way—in our case it was a perch-like variety of dainty pan-fish, fresh from the Rhône. A third course of fish sometimes is served, but the third course usually is snails cooked in a rich brown sauce strongly flavored with garlic. The Provençal snails, which feed in a *gourmet* fashion upon vine-leaves, are peculiarly delicious, and there was a murmur of delight from our company as the four women brought to the table four big dishes full of them; and for a while there was only the sound of eager munching, mixed with the clatter on china of the empty shells. To extract them we had the strong thorns, three or four inches long, of the wild acacia; and on these the little brown morsels were carried to the avid mouths and eaten with a bit of bread sopped in the sauce; and then the shell was subjected to a vigorous sucking, that not a drop of the sauce lingering within it should be lost.

To the snails succeeded another dish essentially Provençal, carde. The carde is a giant thistle that grows to a height of five or six feet, and is so luxuriantly magnificent both in leaf and in flower that it deserves a place among ornamental plants. The edible portion is the stem—blanched like celery, which it much resembles, by being earthed up—cooked with a white sauce flavored with garlic. The garlic, however, is a mistake, since it overpowers the delicate taste of the carde; but garlic is the overlord of all things eatable in Provence. I was glad when we passed on to the celery, with which the first section of the supper came to an end.

The second section was such an explosion of sweets as might fly into space should a comet collide with a confectioner's shop—nougat, fougasso, a great poumpo, compotes, candied fruits, and a whole nightmare herd of rich cakes on which persons not blessed

DRAWN BY LOUIS LOEB.

THE ANGEL AND THE SHEPHERD.

(SEE PAGE 283.)

with the most powerful organs of digestion surely would go galloping to the country of dreadful dreams. Of the dessert of nuts and fruit the notable features were grapes and winter melons.

With the serious part of the supper we drank the ordinary small wine diluted with water; but with the dessert was paraded a gallant company of dusty bottles containing ancient vintages which through many ripening years had been growing richer by feeding upon their own excellence in the wine-room of the Mazet or the cellar of the château.

XII.

BUT the material element of the Great Supper is its least part. What entitles it to the augmenting adjective is its soul—that subtle essence of peace and amity for which the word Christmas is a synonym in all Christian lands. It is the rule of these family gatherings at Christmas-time in Provence that the heartburnings and rancors which may have sprung up during the year then shall be cut down; and even if sometimes they quickly grow again, as no doubt they do now and then, it makes for happiness that they shall be thus banished from the peace-feast of the year. When the serious part of the supper had been disposed of and the mere palate-tickling period of the dessert had come, I was much interested in observing that the talk, mainly carried on by the elders, was turned with an obviously deliberate purpose upon family history, and especially upon the doings of those who in the past had brought honor upon the family name.

The chief ancestral glory of the family of the Mazet is its close blood-relationship with the gallant André Etienne, that drummer of the fifty-first demi-brigade of the Army of Italy who is commemorated on the frieze of the Panthéon, and who is known and honored as the «Tambour d'Arcole» all over France. It was delightful to listen to old Jan's telling of the brave story: how this André, their own kinsman, swam the stream under the enemy's fire at Arcola with his drum on his back and then drummed his fellow-soldiers on to vic-victory; how Bonaparte awarded him the drumsticks of honor, and later, when the Legion of Honor was founded, gave him the cross; how they carved him in stone, drumming the charge, up there on the front of the Panthéon in Paris itself; how Mistral, the great poet of Provence, had made a poem about him that had been printed in a book; and how, only two years ago, they set up his marble statue in Cadenet, the little town, not far from Avignon, where he was born!

Old Jan was not content with merely telling this story—like a true Provençal he acted it: swinging a supposititious drum upon his back, jumping into an imaginary river and swimming it with his head in the air, swinging his drum back into place again, and then —*zóu!*—starting off at the head of the fifty-first demi-brigade with such a rousing play of drumsticks that I protest we fairly heard the rattle of them, along with the spatter of Austrian musketry in the face of which André Etienne beat that gallant *pas de charge!*

It set me all a-thrilling; and still more did it thrill those other listeners who were of the Arcola hero's very blood and bone. They clapped their hands and they shouted. They laughed with delight. And the fighting spirit of Gaul was so stirred within them that at a word. I verily believe they would have been for marching in a body across the southeastern frontier!

Elizo's old father was rather out of the running in this matter. It was not by any relative of his that the drumsticks of honor had been won; and his thoughts, after wandering a little, evidently settled down upon the strictly personal fact that his thin old legs were cold. Rising slowly from the table, he carried his plate to the fireplace, and when he had arranged some live coals in one of the sconces of the waist-high andirons he rested the plate above them on the iron rim; and so stood there, eating contentedly, while the warmth from the glowing Yule log entered gratefully into his lean old body and stirred to a brisker pulsing the blood in his meager veins. But his interest in what was going forward revived again—his legs being, also, by that time well warmed—when his own praises were sounded by his daughter in the story of how he stopped the runaway horse on the very brink of the precipice at Les Baux; and how his wife all the while sat steady beside him in the cart, cool and silent and showing no sign of fear.

When Elizo had finished this story she whispered a word to Magali and Nanoun that sent them laughing out of the room; and presently Magali came back again arrayed in the identical dress which had been worn by the heroine of the adventure—who had perked and plumed herself not a little while her daughter told about it—when the runaway horse so nearly had galloped her off the Baux rock into eternity. It was the Provençal costume, with full sleeves and flaring cap, of sixty years back; but a little gayer than the

strict Arles dress of that period, because her mother was not of Arles, but of Beaucaire. It was not so graceful, especially in the headdress, as the costume of the present day; nor nearly so becoming—as Magali showed by looking a dozen years older after putting it on. But Magali, even with a dozen years added, could not but be charming.

By long experience, gained on many such occasions, the Vidame knew that the culminating point of the supper would be reached when the family drummer swam the river and headed the French charge at Arcola. Therefore had he reserved until a later period, when the excitement incident to the revival of that honorable bit of family history should have subsided, a joy-giving bombshell of his own that he had all ready to explode. An American or an Englishman never could have fired it without something in the way of speechmaking; but the Vidame was of a shy temper, and speechmaking was not in his line. When the chatter caused by Magali's costuming had lulled a little, and there came a momentary pause in the talk, he merely reached diagonally across the table and touched glasses with Esperit and said simply: «To your good health, Monsieur the Superintendent of the Lower Farm!»

It was done so quietly that for some seconds no one realized that the Vidame's toast brought happiness to all the household, and to two of its members a lifelong joy. Esperit, even, had his glass almost to his lips before he understood to what he was drinking; and then his understanding came through the finer nature of Magali, who gave a quick, deep sob as she buried her face in the buxom Nanoun's bosom and encircled that astonished young person's neck with her arms. Esperit went pale at that; but the hand did not tremble in which he held his still raised glass, nor did his voice quaver as he said with a deep earnestness: «To the good health of Monsieur le Vidame, with the thanks of two very happy hearts!»—and so drained his wine.

A great danger puts no more strain upon the nerves of a man of good fiber than does a great joy; and it seemed to me that Esperit's absolute steadiness, under this sudden fire of happiness, showed him to be made of as fine and as manly stuff as went to the making of his kinsman who beat the pas de charge up the slope at Arcola at the head of the fifty-first demi-brigade.

But nothing less than the turbulence of the whole battle of Arcola—not to say of that whole triumphant campaign in Italy—will suffice for a comparison with the tumult that arose about our supper-table when the meaning of the Vidame's toast fairly was grasped by the company at large. I do not think that I could express in words, nor by any less elaborate method of illustration than a kinetoscope, the state of excitement into which a Provençal will fly over a matter of absolutely no importance at all; how he will burst forth into a very whirlwind of words and gestures about some trifle that an ordinary human being would dispose of without the quiver of an eye. And as our matter was one so truly moving that a very Dutchman through all his phlegm would have been stirred by it, such a tornado was set a-going as would have put a mere hurricane of the tropics to open shame.

Naturally, the disturbance was central over Esperit and Magali and the Vidame. The latter—his kind old face shining like the sun of an Easter morning—gave back with a good will on Magali's cheeks her kisses of gratitude, and exchanged embraces and kisses with the elder women, and went through such an ordeal of violent handshaking that I trembled for the integrity of his arms. But as for the young people, whom everybody embraced over and over again with a terrible energy—that they came through it all with whole ribs is as near to being a miracle as anything that has happened in modern times!

Gradually the storm subsided, though not without some fierce after-gusts, and at last worked itself off harmlessly in song, as we returned to the ritual of the evening and took to the singing of noëls—the Christmas canticles which are sung between the ending of the Great Supper and the beginning of the midnight mass.

XIII.

The Provençal noëls—being some real, or some imagined, incident of the Nativity told in verse set to a gay or tender air—are the crèche translated into song. The simplest of them are direct renderings of the Bible narrative. Our own Christmas hymn, «While Shepherds Watched their Flocks by Night,» is precisely of this order; and, indeed, is of the very period when flourished the greatest of the Provençal noël-writers; for the poet laureate Nahum Tate, whose laurel this hymn keeps green, was born in the year 1652 and had begun his mildly poetic career while Saboly still was alive.

But most of the noëls—*nouvè* they are called in Provençal—are purely imaginative:

quaintly innocent stories created by the poets, or taken from those apocryphal scriptures in which the simple-minded faithful of patristic times built up a warmly colored legend of the Virgin's life and of the birth and childhood of her Son. Sometimes, even, the writers stray away entirely from a religious base and produce mere roistering catches or topical songs.

The Provençaux have been writing noëls for more than four hundred years. One of the oldest belongs to the first half of the fifteenth century and is ascribed to Raymond Féraud; the latest are of our own day—by Roumanille, Crousillat, Mistral, Girard, Gras, and a score more. But only a few have been written to live. The memory of many once famous noël-writers is preserved now either mainly or wholly by a single song.

The one assured immortal among these musical mortalities is Nicolas Saboly,[1] who was born in Monteux, close by Avignon, in the year 1614; who for the greater part of his life was chapel-master and organist of the Avignon church of St. Pierre; who died in the year 1675; and who was buried in the choir of the church which for so long he had filled with his own heaven-sweet harmonies.

Saboly's music has a «go» and a melodic quality suggestive of the work of Sir Arthur Sullivan; but it has a more tender, a fresher, a purer note, even more sparkle, than ever Sullivan has achieved. In his gay airs the attack is instant, brilliant, overpowering,—like a glad outburst of sweet bells, like the joyous laughter of a child,—and everything goes with a dash and a swing. But while he thus loved to harmonize a laugh, he also could strike a note of infinite tenderness. In his pathetic noëls he drops into thrillingly plaintive minors which fairly drag one's heart out—echoes or survivals, possibly (for this poignant melody is not uncommon in old Provençal music), of the passionately longing love-songs with which Saracen knights once went a-serenading beneath castle windows here in Provence.

Nor is his verse, of its curious kind, less excellent than his music. By turns, as the humor takes him, his noëls are sermons, or delicate religious fancies, or sharp-pointed satires, or whimsical studies of country-side life. One whole series of seven is a history of the Nativity (surely the quaintest and the gayest and the tenderest oratorio that ever was written!) in which, in music and in words, he is at his very best. Above all, his noëls are local.

[1] The admirable edition of Saboly's noëls, text and music, published at Avignon in the year 1856 by François Seguin, is to be reissued for this present Christmas by the same publisher in definitive form. It can be obtained through the Librairie Roumanille, Avignon.

This naïve local twist is not peculiar to Saboly. With very few exceptions all Provençal noëls are packed full of the same delightful anachronisms. It is to Provençal shepherds that the herald angel appears; it is Provençaux who compose the *bregado,* the pilgrim company, that starts for Bethlehem; and Bethlehem is a village always within easy walking-distance here in Provence. Yet is it not wholly simplicity that has brought about this shifting of the scene of the Nativity from the hill-country of Judea to the hill-country of southeastern France. The life and the look of the two lands have much in common; and most impressively will their common character be felt by one who walks here by night beneath the stars.

XIV.

It was with Saboly's «Hòu, de l'houstau!» that our singing began. It is one of the series in his history of the Nativity and is the most popular of all his noëls: a dialogue between Saint Joseph and the Bethlehem innkeeper, that opens with a sweet and plaintive long-drawn note of supplication as Saint Joseph timorously calls:

> O-o-oh, there, the house! Master! Mistress!
> Varlet! Maid! Is *no* one there?

And then it continues with humble entreaties for shelter for himself and his wife, who is very near her time; to which the host replies with rough refusals for a while, but in the end grants grudgingly a corner of his stable in which the wayfarers may lie for the night.

Esperit and Magali sang this responsively; Magali taking Saint Joseph's part—in which, in all the noëls, is a strain of feminine sweetness and gentleness. Then Marius and Esperit, in the same fashion, sang the famous «C'est le bon lever,» a dialogue between an angel and a shepherd, in which the angel, as becomes so exalted a personage, speaks French, while the shepherd speaks Provençal.

«It 's high time to get up, sweet shepherd,» the angel begins; and goes on to tell that «in Bethlehem, quite near this place,» the Saviour of the world has been born of a virgin.

«Perhaps you take me for a common peasant,» the shepherd answers, «talking to me like that! I am poor, but I 'd have you to know that I come of good stock. In old times my great-great-grandfather was mayor

of our village! And who are you, anyway, fine sir! Are you a Jew or a Dutchman? Your jargon makes me laugh. A virgin mother! A child god! No, never were such things heard!»

But when the angel reiterates his strange statement the shepherd's interest is aroused. He declares that he will go at once and steal this miraculous child; and he quite takes the angel into his confidence—as though standing close to his elbow and speaking as friend to friend. In the end, of course, he is convinced of the miracle, and says that he «will get the ass and set forth» to join the worshipers about the manger at Bethlehem.

There are many of these noëls in dialogue; and most of them are touched with this same quality of easy familiarity with sacred subjects, and abound in turns of broad humor, which render them not a little startling from our nicer point of view. But they never are coarse, and their simplicity saves them from being irreverent; nor is there, I am sure, the least thought of irreverence on the part of those by whom they are sung. I noticed, though, that these lively numbers were the ones which most hit the fancy of the men; while the women as plainly showed their liking for those of a finer spirit in which the dominant qualities were pathos and grace.

Of this latter class is Roumanille's rarely beautiful noël, «The Blind Girl» («La Chato Avuglo»),[1] that Magali sang with a tenderness which set the women to crying openly, and which made the older men cough a little and look suspiciously red about the eyes. Of all the modern noëls it has come closest to and has taken the strongest hold upon the popular heart—this pathetic story of the child «blind from her birth,» who pleads with her mother that she also may go with the rest to Bethlehem, urging that though she cannot see the «lovely golden face» she still may touch the Christ-child's hand.

And when, all thrilling, to the stable she was come
She placed the little hand of Jesus on her heart—
And saw him whom she touched!

I am persuaded, so thoroughly did they all enjoy their own caroling, that the singing of noëls would have gone on until broad daylight had it not been for the intervention of the midnight mass. But the mass of Christmas eve—or, rather, of Christmas morning—is a matter not only of pleasure, but of obligation. Even those upon whom churchly requirements at other times rest lightly rarely fail to attend it; and to the faithful it is the most touchingly beautiful, as Easter is the most joyous, church festival of the year.

By eleven o'clock, therefore, we were under way for our walk of a mile or so down the long slope of the hillside to the village.

Presently some one started a very sweet and plaintive noël, fairly heart-wringing in its tender beseeching and soft lament, yet with a consoling undernote to which it constantly returned. I think, but I am not sure, that it was Roumanille's noël telling of the widowed mother who carried the cradle of her own baby to the Virgin, that the Christ-child might not lie on straw.[2] One by one the other voices took up the strain, until in a full chorus the sorrowingly compassionate melody went thrilling through the moonlit silence of the night.

And so, singing, we walked by the white way onward, hearing as we neared the town the songs of other companies coming up, as ours was, from outlying farms. And when they and we had passed in through the gateways—where the townsfolk of old lashed out against their robber infidel and robber Christian enemies—all the black, little narrow streets were filled with an undertone of murmuring voices and an overtone of clear, sweet song.

XV.

ON the little Grande Place the crowd was packed densely. There the several streams of humanity pouring into the town met and mingled, and thence in a strong current flowed onward into the church. Coming from the blackness without,—for the tall houses surrounding the Grande Place cut off the moonlight and made it a little pocket of darkness,—it was with a shock of splendor that we encountered the brightness within. All the side-altars were blazing with candles, and as the service went on, and the high altar also flamed up, the whole building was filled with a soft radiance—save that strange luminous shadows lingered in the lofty vaulting of the nave.

After the high altar, the most brilliant spot was the altar of Saint Joseph, in the west transept; beside which was a magnificent crèche, the figures half life-size, beautifully modeled and richly clothed. But there was nothing whimsical about this crèche: the group might have been, and very possibly had been, composed after a well-painted «Nativity» by some artist of the late Renaissance.

The mass was the customary office; but at

[1] See page 262.

[2] See page 181.

the offertory it was interrupted by a ceremony that gave it suddenly an entirely medieval cast, of which I felt more fully the beauty, and the strangeness in our time, because the Vidame sedulously had guarded against my having knowledge of it in advance. This was nothing less than a living rendering of the adoration of the shepherds, done with a simplicity to make one fancy the figures in Ghirlandajo's picture were alive again and stirred by the very spirit that animated them when they were set on canvas four hundred years ago.

By some means only a little short of a miracle, a way was opened through the dense crowd along the center of the nave from the door to the altar, and up this way with their offerings real shepherds came—the quaintest procession that anywhere I have ever seen. In the lead were four musicians, playing upon the tambourin, the galoubet, the very small cymbals called *palets*, and the bagpipe-like *carlamuso;* and then, two by two, came ten shepherds wearing the long, brown, full cloaks, weather-stained and patched and mended, which seem always to have come down through many generations and which never by any chance are new; carrying tucked beneath their arms their battered felt hats browned, like their cloaks, by long warfare with sun and rain; holding in one hand a lighted candle and in the other a staff. The two leaders, dispensing with staves and candles, bore garlanded baskets; one filled with fruit—melons, pears, apples, and grapes—and in the other a pair of doves, which with sharp, quick motions turned their heads from side to side as they gazed wonderingly on their strange surroundings with their bright, beautiful eyes.

Following came the main offering—a spotless lamb. Most originally, and in a way poetically, was this offering made. Drawn by a mild-faced ewe, whose fleece had been washed to a wonder of whiteness and who was decked out with bright-colored ribbons in a way to unhinge with vanity her sheepish mind, was a little two-wheeled cart—all garlanded with laurel and holly, and bedizened with knots of ribbon and pink paper roses and glittering little objects such as are hung on Christmas trees in other lands. Lying in the cart placidly, not bound and not in the least frightened, was the dazzlingly white lamb, decked like the ewe with knots of ribbon and wearing about its neck a red collar brilliant to behold. Now and then the ewe would turn to look at it, and in response to one of these wistful maternal glances the little creature stood up shakily on its unduly long legs and gave an anxious baa. But when a shepherd bent over and stroked it gently, it was reassured; lying down contentedly again in its queer little car of triumph, and thereafter through the ceremony remaining still.

Behind the car came ten more shepherds, and in their wake a long double line of country-folk, each with a lighted candle in hand. There is difficulty, indeed, in keeping this part of the demonstration within bounds, because it is esteemed an honor and a privilege to walk in the procession of the offered lamb.

Slowly this strange company moved toward the altar, where the ministering priest awaited its coming; and at the altar steps the bearers of the fruit and the doves separated, so that the little cart might come between them and their offering be made complete, while the other shepherds formed a semicircle in the rear. The music was stilled, and the priest accepted and set upon the altar the baskets; and then extended the paten that the shepherds, kneeling, might kiss it in token of their offering of the lamb. This completed the ceremony. The tambourin and galoubet and palets and carlamuso all together struck up again, and the shepherds and the lamb's car passed down the nave between the files of candle-bearers and so out through the door.

Within the last sixty years or so this naïve ceremony has fallen more and more into disuse. But it still occasionally is revived—as at Barbentane in 1868, and Rognonas in 1894, and repeatedly within the last decade in the sheep-raising parish of Maussane—by a curé who is at one with his flock in a love for the customs of ancient times. Its origin assuredly goes back far into antiquity; so very far, indeed, that the airs played by the musicians in the procession seem by comparison quite of our own time: yet tradition ascribes the composition of these airs to the good King René, whose happy rule over Provence ended more than four centuries ago.

XVI.

When the stir caused by the coming and going of the shepherds had subsided, the mass went on, with no change from the usual observance, until the sacrament was administered, save that there was a vigorous singing of noëls. It was congregational singing of a very enthusiastic sort,—indeed, nothing short of gagging every one of them could have kept those song-loving Provençaux still,—but it was led by the choir, and choristers

took the solo parts. The most notable number was the famous noël in which the crowing of a cock alternates with the note of a nightingale; each verse beginning with a prodigious cock-a-doodle-d-o-o! and then rattling along to the gayest of gay airs. The nightingale was not a brilliant success; but the cock-crowing was so realistic that at its first outburst I thought that a genuine barnyard gallant was up in the organ-loft. I learned later that this was a musical *tour de force* for which the organist was famed. A buzz of delight filled the church after each cock-crowing volley; and I fancy that I was alone in finding anything odd in so jaunty a performance within church walls. The viewpoint in regard to such matters is of race and education. The Provençaux, who are born laughing, are not necessarily irreverent because even in sacred places they sometimes are frankly gay.

Assuredly, there was no lack of seemly decorum when the moment came for the administration of the sacrament, which rite on Christmas eve is reserved to the women, the men communing on Christmas day. The women who were to partake—nearly all who were present—wore the Provençal costume, but of dark color. Most of them were in black, save for the white *chapelle*, or kerchief, and the scrap of white which shows above the ribbon confining the knotted hair. But before going up to the altar each placed upon her head a white gauze veil, so long and so ample that her whole person was enveloped in its soft folds; and the women were so many, and their action was with such sudden unanimity, that in a moment a delicate mist seemed to have fallen and spread its silvery whiteness over all the throng.

Singly and by twos and threes these palely gleaming figures moved toward the altar, until more than a hundred of them were crowded together before the sanctuary rail. Nearest to the rail, being privileged to commune before the rest, stood a row of black-robed sisters—teachers in the parish school—whose somber habits made a vigorous line of black against the dazzle of the altar, everywhere aflame with candles, and by contrast gave to all that sweep of lustrous misty whiteness a splendor still softer and more strange. And within the rail the rich vestments of the ministering priests, and the rich cloths of the altar, all in a flood of light, added a warm color-note of gorgeous tones.

Slowly the rite went on. Twenty at a time the women, kneeling, ranged themselves at the rail, rising to give room to others when they had partaken, and so returning to their seats. For a full half-hour those pale, lambent figures were moving ghost-like about the church, while the white-veiled throng before the altar gradually diminished until at last it disappeared, fading from sight a little at a time, softly, as dream-visions of things beautiful melt away.

Presently came the benediction, and all together we streamed out from the brightness of the church into the wintry darkness, being by that time well into Christmas morning, and the moon gone down. But when we had left behind us the black streets of the little town, and were come out into the open country, the star-haze sufficed to light us as we went onward by the windings of the spectral white road; for the stars shine very gloriously in Provence.

We elders kept together staidly, as became the gravity of our years; but the young people, save two of them, frolicked on ahead and took again with a will to singing noëls; and from afar we heard through the night stillness, sweetly, other home-going companies singing these glad Christmas songs. Lingering behind us, following slowly, came Esperit and Magali, to whom that Christmas-tide had brought a lifetime's happiness. They did not join in the joy-songs, nor did I hear them talking. The fullest love is still.

And peace and good-will were with us as we went along the white way homeward beneath the Christmas morning stars.

Thomas A. Janvier.

DOUBT.

I.

THOU Christ, my soul is hurt and bruised;
With words the scholars wear me out:
Brain of me weary and confused,—
Thee, and myself, and all I doubt.

II.

And must I back to darkness go
Because I cannot say their creed?
I know not what I think; I know
Only that thou art what I need.

R.