

YOUNG AMERICA

Saint Nicholas's Eve in Belgium.

For two weeks the shop windows had been gradually growing gayer, and the usual scanty supply of toys on the numerous booths in the Vreitag Markt had increased, both in quantity and brilliancy. I remarked this to a Flemish friend, saying it seemed early to begin preparations for Christmas.

"But it isn't for Christmas! We celebrate that holiday only by extra church ceremonies. Our day is Saint Nicholas's birthday, and our children receive their gifts from the hand of a representative of the dear old saint, instead of having them hung from a tree, as in Germany; or stuffed into stockings, as I have heard they do in America. But suppose you come and take an English tea with us that evening, and see how we keep the festival."

I was too glad of the chance to see one of the national institutions of the country to refuse such an invitation; so in the interim I studied up the history of the saint, that I might run no risk of showing my ignorance, should he or his deeds be under discussion on his festal day.

In my researches, I found he was born the 6th of December, 326, of illustrious Christian parents, in Panthera, a city of Lycia, in Asia Minor; and was early dedicated to the service of the Church. His parents dying while he was still young, he regarded himself as only God's steward over the vast wealth they had left him.

After their death, he went to Myra, in Syria, where he lived in great humility. When the bishop of that city died, a revelation was made to the clergy to the effect that God had chosen for their bishop the man who should enter the church first the next morning. So when Nicholas went early to pray, as was his custom, the clergy led him into the church

and consecrated him. He proved himself worthy of his new dignity in every way, but especially by his charities, of which tradition recounts hundreds of instances.

After a life spent in doing all manner of good works, he died in great peace and joy, and was buried in a magnificent church in Myra, where his tomb was, for centuries, a resort for pilgrims.

In 807, the church was attacked by Achmet, commander of the fleet of Haroun Al Raschid. But the watchfulness of the monks prevented his doing any harm, and putting to sea, he and his entire fleet were destroyed.

The remains of the saint rested in Myra till 1084, when the city was desolated by Saracens and the remains stolen away by some merchants of Bari, who took them home, where a splendid church was erected for their resting-place.

In Greek pictures, Nicholas is dressed like an eastern bishop, with no miter, a cross in place of a crozier, and the three Persons of the Trinity embroidered on his cape. In western art he wears a miter, crozier, cape and jeweled gloves.

He is not only the chief patron of Russia, but the most popular of all the saints in Catholic Europe, being the patron of children and school-boys in particular.

Having thus fortified myself with the chief points of interest in the history of his saintship, I donned hat and cloak on the eve of December 6th, and sauntered along the Rue digue de Brabant, which presented very much the appearance of Christmas Eve in a small German town; shortly after reaching Sedeberg, a suburb of the city, the English tea was served. Oh! ye gods, what a sight

for a hungry mortal! Cups filled with some colorless fluid were passed about, accompanied by two carafes, one containing *vanilla* and the other *rum*, which our kind hostess urged us to use—saying, when we declined, "Your tea will have no taste without it." This assertion was true, as our palates certified. Thin slices of black bread, spread with the smallest amount of butter, and so dry that the edges curled, were offered to eat with our tea. I had never had any especial affinity for dogs, but blessings most fervent were heaped that evening on the head of a tiny spaniel who aided me in consuming the *tartines* I was forced, for politeness sake to take; stealthily I conveyed them under the table, where he gladly devoured them.

This duty finished, a loud rapping outside gave notice of an arrival. The door was opened, and a short, stout gentleman, with long white beard, wearing a miter, and carrying a crozier in one hand, and holding by the other a pretty young girl, who held a heaped-up basket of toys, picture books, and bonbons. Following them, and fastened by a chain came a grinning imp, bearing a huge bunch of switches. What a flutter of excitement was caused by this arrival among the little ones! The baby clung to her mother's neck, half frightened, and yet pleased. Little Jacques, mindful of his sins of omission, snatched up his spelling-book and dropped upon his knees in genuine terror and despair, while Amélie, whose conscience was clear, or who was old enough to remember the previous 6th of December, stood bravely up to answer all questions which might be put to her by saint or demon. They were evidently jolly old fellows both, and their lectures delivered in Flemish, of which I understood not a word, could not have been very awful, since they turned Jacques' sobs to smiles, and baby Thérèse held out her arms to go with them as they waved a good-by after dividing the contents of baskets and bundle among children and guests.

The saint having departed, we were invited into the dining-room, where to our gratification we found a Flemish supper awaiting us. How delicious was the delicate soup, served in the daintiest of Sévres cups, the sweet-breads, roast ducks, Brussels sprouts, etc. We were not slow in doing justice to the hospitable feast, made more pleasant still by laughter and merry talk, so that when, as preventive of indigestion, the huge china bowl brimming with a national drink, fragrant of oranges and lemons, was placed on the table, we delightedly gave as our toast, "*A bas les thé's anglais, et vive les soupers Flamands!*"



SAINT NICHOLAS'S EVE IN BELGIUM.