



WHILE the New Year's observances were toward, the Romans left off going to law with one another. Afterwards, no doubt, they returned to the courts with the gusto of abstinence; but litigation was tabooed at the New Year, and it was a breach of good form for one citizen to call another "out of his name" with that astonishing licence which was customary at other and less convivial seasons. It was a worthy feature of the Roman festival, and it is a pity it was not remembered by the poet and pastrycook whose "remarkable lawsuits," arising out of the celebration of New Year's Day, are chronicled in the pages of Hone. The pastrycook commissioned the poet to write him some mottoes for his New Year's Day bon-bons. To this sad exercise, or kindred ones, the muse has had to stoop in every age, *por murzar* (to eat), as the Cid said, when he bamboozled the Jews into lending him money on two trunks feloniously filled with sand; and the poet agreed to produce a fair five hundred couplets for six livres. The couplets were duly turned out, but the pastrycook was not "on time" with the livres. The couplets were presented in MS., whereas the pastrycook insisted they should have been printed in slips, "ready for enclosure within his bon-bons." But the poet found no mention of

print in his bond, so "the parties joined issue," and the jury plumped for the poet. Yet a second time was the pastrycook worsted, for he went to law with the poet again on the ground that he had "sold a copy of the same mottoes to another confectioner." The poet maintained that "not a word had passed indicating a transfer of exclusive right" (he must have purveyed mottoes to pastrycooks before), the court upheld him, and his right was established to resell his mottoes "to all the confectioners in the universe." Translations of them may have been picked out of crackers and read over Bayswater dinner-tables this week past.

We started in Rome, and it is not easy to get away from Rome and the Romans in the most desultory discussion of New Year's Day. For that matter we may go as far afield as we please, and we shall find some special ceremony to mark the day or season. Let the year be opened on this day or on that—we have no common calendar for the world—the first day has been reckoned of peculiar interest amongst Romans, Jews, Egyptians, Chinese, and Mohammedans. We may stand to Rome, however, and leave the rest of the world aside, for it would seem that in pagan institutions we must ground many of those New Year's rites which, travelling to us through an infinite succession of

years, have got sadly mairied and disfigured in their progress. Hence the pother in the early Church about all sorts of New Year's customs. The mildest and kindest observances of the day were denounced as idolatrous. Christian man was a "meer heathen" who ventured to wish for his neighbour a "happy New Year," or to send him a baked pie for dinner. This opprobrious notion lived long. Here is an expression of it, once well known, from *The Popish Kingdom* :—

"The next to this is New Year's Day, whereon
to every frende
They costly presents in do bring, and Newe
Yeare's gifts do sende.
These gifts the husbände gives his wife, and
father eke the childe,
And maister on his men bestowes the like,
with favour milde ;
And good beginning of the yeare they wishe
and wishe againe,
According to the aunciente guise of heathen
people vaine."



That was published as late as 1750. Centuries earlier the Church had talked most severely on the subject ; to no great purpose it must be confessed. In the matter of feasts, as in most other matters, human nature is much the same, everywhere and at all times ; and, as a New Year's essayist in an old number of the *Antiquary* observes, "What was done on the banks of the Tiber was done in the

north-east corner of Scotland." But the attitude of the early Church is not quite unreasonable from the early Church's point of view. The Christian observances of the first day of the year were denounced, not because they were essentially parlous, but because they were loans from, or adaptations of pagan superstitions which the Church held in abhorrence. New Year's gifts, for example, were under the ban, from the consideration of the Fathers that they were originally offered as omens of success for the ensuing year. A like superstitious notion was regarded as lurking in the "benevolent compliment," "A happy New Year to you!" This mood would carry the Church far ; domestic junketings were easily viewed as "grand disorderly festivals" ; a card-party with spiced ale became an obvious reflex of "those heathenish enterludes," and "lewd idolatrous practices" ; and good Christians were bidden, under pain of excommunication, to keep New Year's Day as

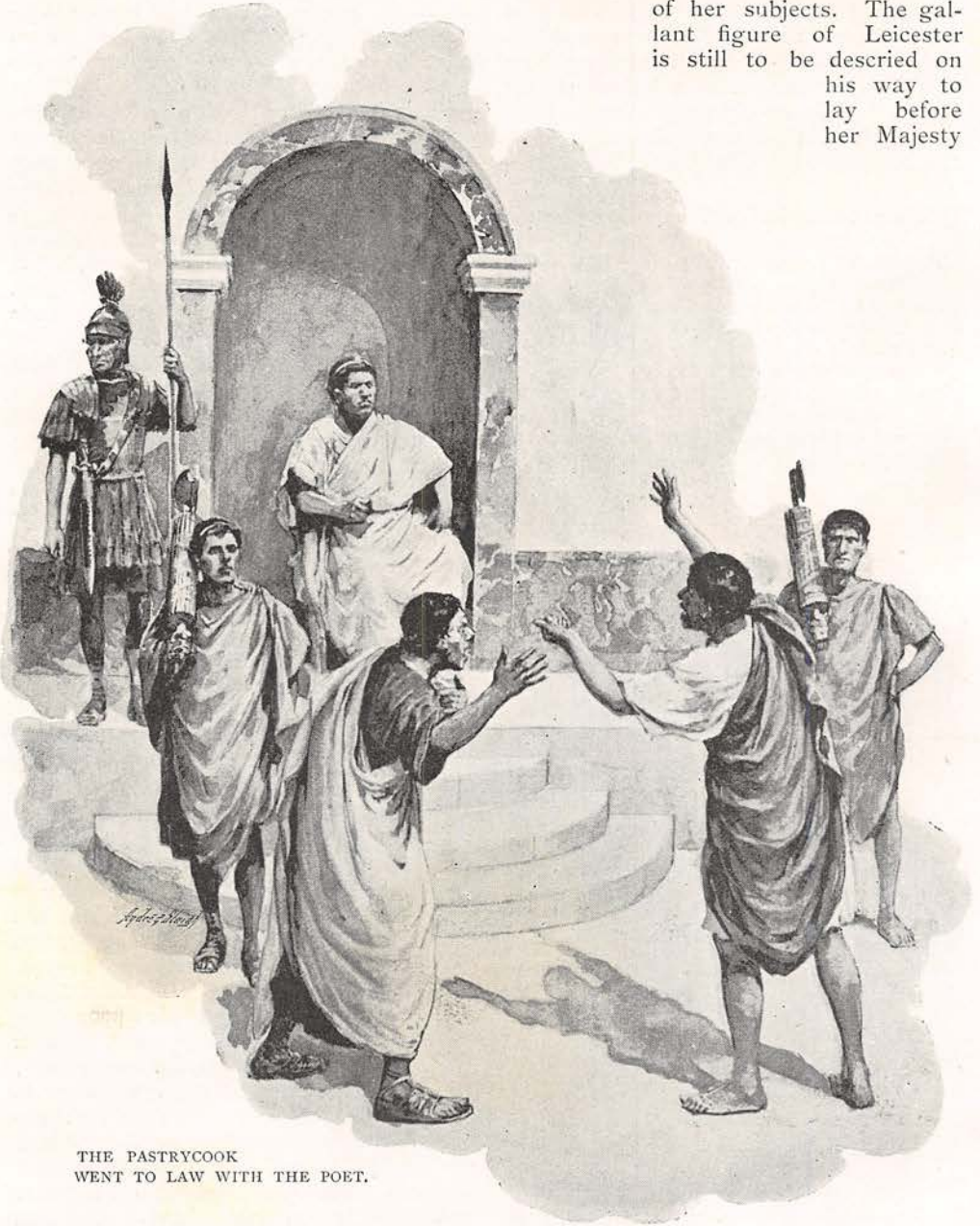
"a solemn publike faste." Later on this merges in the general tyranny of Puritanism, when

"These teach that Dancing is a
Jezebel,
And Barly-Break the ready way to
Hell ;
The Morice Idols, Whitsun Ales can
be
But phopane reliques of a Jubilee."

Our New Year's gifts are of pagan Rome in their origin. The New Year was always a festival of gifts. "The Roman citizens," says the Rev. Walter Gregor in the *Antiquary*, "gave *Strenæ* to each other and to their rulers. At first these gifts were simple, and such as the poorest could give, mere expressions of goodwill and of good wishes for prosperity during the coming year. With the increase of wealth and power, and the loss of the austere mode of life, they became a tax on those who, from their rank, or office, or wealth, were required to give." Emperors took toll of their subjects unblushingly on this day. Caligula rolled in the gold pieces, and rolled himself atop of them. Claudius, it is said, abolished the custom, so far as the emperors were concerned. The word passed into the language of the Italians, and Dante makes mention of *strenne* in a canto of the *Purgatorio*.

This goodly tax for the benefit of monarchs makes its appearance in English history in the reign of Henry VI., and

above accepting from faithful hands sugar loaves, fat geese, turkey hens, sweetmeats, "and other articles." Royal Elizabeth might have kept herself in gowns and trinkets out of the New Year's offerings of her subjects. The gallant figure of Leicester is still to be descried on his way to lay before her Majesty



THE PASTRYCOOK
WENT TO LAW WITH THE POET.

various manuscript rolls of the public revenue show how large an item were the gifts of the nobles and high officers to the sovereign between Christmas Day and the New Year. Presents of gold and jewels were the commonest, but royalty was not

"one armlet or shakell of gold, all over fairly garnished with rubyes and dyamondes. . . . in a case of purple vellate all over embranderid with Venice golde." Her Majesty's silk-woman, Mrs. Montague, presented her with a pair of black



"THESE GIFTS THE HUSBAND GIVES HIS WIFE."

silk stockings of her own knitting, "and thenceforth she never wore cloth hose any more." Was it in the new black silk stockings of Mrs. Montague that Elizabeth made display of her royal calves to the foreign Ambassador, or was it the Queen of Sheba, and not Elizabeth, who showed her legs, innocent of any sort of

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hose, to some favoured visitor from abroad? I believe Victor Hugo has said that she showed them to King Solomon. Perhaps it was the gracious custom when a Queen went to call upon a King.

The making of New Year's gifts to the sovereign was a waning custom in James I.'s time, no rolls of such offerings

are amongst the records of Charles I.'s reign, the custom appears to have ceased entirely during the Commonwealth, and was never afterwards revived. The costliest New Year's present of which notice has been preserved was that of Louis XIV. to Madame de Montespan, "two covered goblets and a salver of embossed gold, richly ornamented with

ing the old year out and ringing the new year in." The institutions of "glove-money" and "pin-money" are both traceable to the custom of present-giving on the first day of the year. Gloves, when they were rarer and more expensive articles than they are nowadays, were favourite New Year's offerings; "and occasionally a sum of money was given



ROYALTY . . .
ACCEPTING FROM FAITHFUL HANDS FAT GEESE . . .
AND OTHER ARTICLES.

diamonds and emeralds," and valued at ten thousand crowns. Presents were exchanged occasionally between friendly monarchs, something simple, as a purse of gold, or a little game for the larder.

With the example of royalty before their eyes, the "common people" made light of the protests or prohibitions of the Church. Every one was ready with his little gift when "the bells were ring-

instead, which was called 'glove-money.'" A writer in *Chambers* reminds us how Sir Thomas More received from a lady in whose favour he had decided a cause, a pair of gloves stuffed with forty gold angels. The clean-handed Sir Thomas returned the gold with the following characteristic note:—"Mistress, since it were against good manners to refuse your New Year's gift, I am content to take

your gloves, but as for the *lining*, I utterly refuse it."

Pins, when they began to come to us early in the sixteenth century, were considered a very proper New Year's gift for ladies, and money given to a lady for the purchase of them was called "pin-money"—"an expression which has been extended to a sum of money secured by a husband on his marriage for the private expenses of his wife." There was no Married Woman's Property Act then. Presents amongst the middle and poorer classes might begin at an orange stuck with cloves, and mount in value proportionately to the goodwill of the giver, or the depth of his purse. Masters and mistresses bestowed some token on their servants, and there was generally an interchange of offerings between landlord and tenant. Cowley, in *A Lecture to the People*, says:—

"Ye used in the former days to fall
Prostrate to your landlord in his hall,
When with low legs and in an humble guise,
Ye offered up a capon sacrifice
Unto his worship at a New Year's Tide."

In rural districts it was usual for the whole household to dine together, an occasion of great potations, when the master brewed the punch with his own hand and passed it round the table. Country folk carried a wassail-bowl from house to house through the villages, singing a petitionary carol.

"A jolly Wassel-Bowl,
A Wassel of good ale,
Well fare the butler's soul
That setteth this to sale;
Our jolly Wassel.

"Good Dame, here at your door
Our Wassel we begin,
We are all maidens poor,
We pray now let us in,
With our Wassel," &c.

Scotland had a New Year's mode of begging for the poor, called "thigging," which was carried out by the young men of a district, who started early in the morning to collect meal or money for the old or bedridden. Mr. Gregor gives a snatch of the song which they sang on their rounds:—

"It's nae for oorsels if we come here
B'soothan, b'soothan,
It's for . . . sae scant o' gear,
An' awa b' mony a toon," &c.

The children went a-wassailing on their own account, with their

"Here we come a-wassailing,
Among the trees so green,
Here we come a-wandering,
So fair to be seen."

In no part of the kingdom were the New Year's rites more honoured than in Scotland, where every eye wore

". . . symptoms of a sober jollity";

but "not too sober, neither." A variety of the custom of *first-footing* prevailed in Scotland until within the last forty or fifty years. Thus, towards midnight of New Year's Eve, you brewed or prepared a kettle of sweetened ale, with a dash of spirits (a drop of very pretty tippie, as the gentleman said in *Tess*), then got your family together, and sallied out, with the kettle in the midst, and store of cakes, bread, and cheese. Your goal was the house of some neighbourly gossip, and if you were the first to enter after twelve o'clock, you were honoured as *first-foot*, and a herald of good fortune.

Amorous swains went first-footing in another fashion. It was the time for a lover to steal to the door of his sweetheart's dwelling in the hope that the damsel herself would open to him, when he claimed the forfeit of a kiss. "First-foot" appears as a venerable superstition in the northern districts of England, and in various places in Scotland. Mr. Gregor says: "In many a house in Banffshire, the last thing done was to cover up the peat fire with the ashes and to smother it over. It was carefully and anxiously examined in the morning to see if there was in the ashes anything like the print of a foot, with the toes towards the door. If such a print was traced it was a forecast that one of the household was to leave, if not die. The first fire, too, was watched. If a peat or live coal rolled away from it, there was to be a break in the family circle."

Elsewhere, the first foot that one met on New Year's morn was accounted of good or of evil omen. It was a fearful thing to meet "a sanctimonious person," or a cat. It was well to meet a person with a high-arched sole, but "one having flat soles" was to be diligently avoided. A bachelor was a good first foot, and the maiden might count on blessings who met her lover. There were other forms of divination, as from the appearance of the sky on New Year's morn; and of



WHEN THE MASTER BREWED THE PUNCH . . . AND PASSED IT ROUND THE TABLE.



DRAWING THE FIRST BUCKET FROM THE WELL AT MIDNIGHT ON NEW YEAR'S EVE.

securing good luck, as by drawing the first bucket of water from the well ("the reem o' the wall") on the stroke of midnight on New Year's Eve.

In these latitudes, the Wassail (Wass hael: Health to you!) looms large in all

depended chiefly upon the quality and contents of the cellar. They had a grateful recipe, we may conjecture, in the pantry of the abbot. "Warm, spiced, and sweetened ale with an infusion of spirits" was a good middle-class brew. Warton

printed memories of New Year's Tide. The prevalence of the beer-barrel in these isles, grievous to think on, assisted to give their names to many "old ancient" festivals that have gone the way of nearly all the popular sports and customs of Great Britain, both rural and urban. Had we not, for example, Bride-ale (bridal), Leet-ale, Lamb-ale, and Whitsun-ale? At New Year's Tide, the steam of the wassail rose over all this land. The wassail bowl

"That's tost up
after fox'-i-th'
hole,"

as Herrick sings, lorded it everywhere, from cottage to keep, from mansion to monastery, where they called it *Poculum Caritatis*, for the comfort of their consciences. It is the Gossip's Bowl in the *Midsommer Night's Dream*. The composition of the nectar no doubt

speaks of "ale, nutmeg, sugar, toast, and roasted crabs or apples." Six bottles of port, sherry, or madeira, with cardanums, cloves, nutmeg, and coriander, a pound and a half of fine sugar, and the yolks of twelve, and the whites of six eggs ("set all on the fire in a clean, bright saucepan") went to the making of a wassail for kings and the lords of the earth. After this, one might sing *Hey tuttie taitie* till cock-crow. The wassail "came to signify festivity of rather an intemperate kind," it was drily observed; "which the same" need be no way disputed. Gone is the "jolly wassail," and gone the jolly wassailers, with their *Hey tuttie taitie*, and health to the king, and the "gude companie." Perhaps the Loving Cup that still circulates at civic feasts is the sole survival of that hilarious habit; but the ceremony of the Loving Cup is a chaste and sober function. Nobody would break into *Hey tuttie taitie* over the Loving Cup. If he did, the toast-master would call for his carriage.

The bells ring out the old year yet, and

ring the new one in; and who has moralised more finely upon that suggestive music than Lamb? "Of all sounds," he says, "most solemn and touching is the peal which rings out the old year. I never hear it without a gathering up of my mind to a concentration of all the images that have been diffused over the past twelvemonth; all I have done or suffered, performed or neglected, in that regretted time. I begin to know its worth, as when a person dies. It takes a personal colour; nor was it a poetical flight in a contemporary, when he exclaimed:—

"I saw the skirts of the departing year."

How poor and tawdry, after that, is Southey's

"Come, melancholy Moraliser, come!
Gather with me the dark and wintry wreath;
With me engarland now
The Sepulchre of Time."

The wassail to Mr. Southey, please!