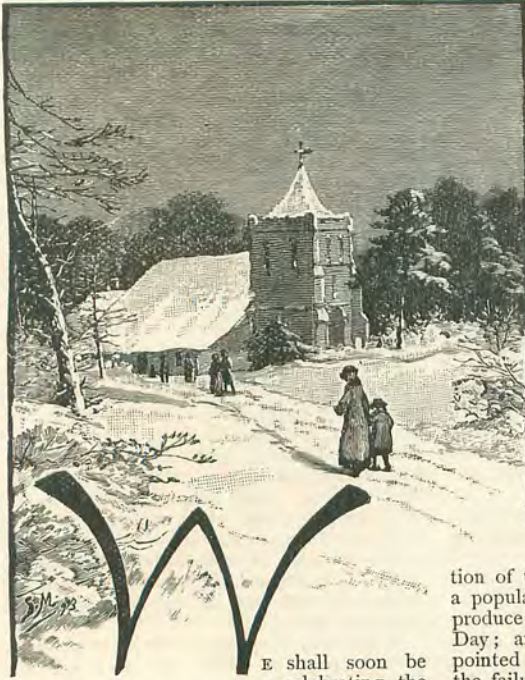


CHRISTMAS CUSTOMS HERE AND ELSEWHERE.



We shall soon be celebrating the most glorious festival of the Christian year, the only festival, we may say, that receives almost universal recognition. Wherever the Christian religion has been preached, Christmas is the joy-time of the year.

Let us say a few words about the origin of this great festival. It was first inaugurated as a festival in the year 98; but it was not till about thirty years after that Pope Telesphorus, in the reign of Antoninus Pius, ordered its annual observance by all true Christians on the 25th December, 137, which then fell on the day we now call the 6th January. From that time it seems to have been constantly and devoutly celebrated throughout the Church.

Christmas was called Yuletide by our Saxon ancestors, and meant literally the festival of the sun. One of their names for the sun was Yule, hence the great feast, which was always held at the winter solstice, was called the Yule feast. Yule was the greatest festival in the countries of Scandinavia. Yule bonfires blazed everywhere to scare witches and wizards, offerings were made to the gods, the boar dedicated to Freyr was placed on the table, and over it the warriors vowed to perform great deeds. Pork, mead, and ale abounded, and the Yuletide passed merrily away with games and mirth of our Saxon forefathers. The houses were decorated with holly, ivy, and mistletoe, the churches were decked with evergreens. Gay says—

“Now with bright holly all the temple
strow
With laurel green and sacred mistletoe.”

Standards covered with greenery were set up in the streets and on the village greens, and there the people danced and made merry. Great fires of wood were kindled in their huge chimneys, and the blazing of the Yule-log is supposed to have been intended to signify the light and heat of the sun. In the king's palace, and in nearly every great house was a personage called the “Lord of Misrule,” or the “Master of Merry Disports,” whose business it was to see that the fun was kept up with spirit. Disguisings, masks, and mummeries were also held accompanied by all

sorts of fun and frolic, men and women dressed in each other's clothes, and gave themselves up to the wildest merriment.

“Now Christmas is come,
Let us beat up the drum,
And call all our neighbours together;
And when they appear
Let us make them such cheer
As will keep out the wind and
the weather.”

In addition to the sports and feasting of Christmastide, there were many singular customs associated with the season to which we must briefly refer. Crowds of people used to assemble on Christmas Day in the burial ground at Glastonbury in Somersetshire to see the thorn bud in bloom, which was said to have sprung from a staff planted by Joseph of Arimathea, to whom tradition attributes the introduction of the Gospel into Britain. It was long a popular belief that this famous thorn would produce flowers in full bloom every Christmas Day; and when the spectators were disappointed in seeing the miracle they ascribed the failure to the alteration of the style, and watched again on old Christmas Day. There was, however, no miracle in the case, as the thorn was one of that species which frequently blows in mild winters.

In this article we desire more to speak of the customs associated with this season in other countries. The Dutch, a slow and phlegmatic race, made their Christmas-keeping a somewhat prolonged festival, often taking more than a week to celebrate it, indulging the whole time in all the good things they could procure, and consuming an amount of “strong waters” that would have meant excess to any temperament less cold and phlegmatic than their own. The old Dutch recipe books contained rules for many compounds requiring delicate manipulation on the part of the cooks. Indeed, one can but conceive the greatest respect for the mental powers of the woman whose “crullers” and waffles were always light and crispy notwithstanding that baking powders and egg-beaters were things unknown, that even “pearl ash” was of home manufacture, and the right quantity of sour cream which was to balance the alkali as well as its due degree of acidity, had to be determined in each individual case.

The French were even more temperate than their neighbours, and very early displayed the talent which has made them what we may call the tutors of the rest of the world in all matters relating to culinary art. To the French Huguenots Christmas was a day of rejoicing, family festivity, and neighbourly greeting. They drank very little strong liquors, and their mild pure wines served but to aid digestion and impart gaiety to the spirits. Rarely was drunkenness known among them. The giving of gifts was a more prominent feature of Christmas-time with them than with others. And their gifts, unlike those of the English and Dutch, which were nearly always of something to eat and drink, were of permanent value. They were poor in this world's goods, most of them having had to flee from their country and leave their possessions behind them, owing to the cruel intolerance of Louis XIV., so that their gifts were seldom costly; but some have

survived even to this day in the possession of their descendants—cobweb laces made by delicate fingers, pointed fans and screens, and embroidered foot-stools and cushions.

Christmas is celebrated with great pomp and ceremony throughout Italy, and especially in Rome and Naples. In these cities, all through the night of the 23rd, the screaming of fish vendors resounds in the streets, for eels are the favourite fish for the day. It is said the Pope receives many tons of this indigestible though savoury dish as a present at this season. In the eternal city the festivity assumes something more of a religious character. The Piazza di Navona with its beautiful fountain is the centre of attraction, and there all sorts of comestibles are to be bought. The people, full of animation, move hither and thither, and in their bright gay dresses present a lively and joyous scene. Among the religious ceremonies which take place at this time, the midnight mass at the church of Santa Maria Maggiore is the chief attraction. In the old days ere the sword of Garibaldi cut away the temporal sovereignty of the Pope, His Holiness was always present at this high mass attended by his brilliant court. In connection with this service there used to be a very curious usage called Blessing of the Sword and Cap, which succeeded a usage still more ancient, namely, that of sending the standard of St. Peter to some sovereign undertaking a crusade in the interests of the Church. Then followed the procession of the sacred “relic,” a portion of Christ's cradle set in a magnificent shrine of crystal with the figure of the Divine Infant in gold. This ceremony, like many others, is now a thing of the past. When the light comes the shadows flee away. After the midnight mass it was usual for the Pope to invite the cardinals and high dignitaries of the city to partake of a sumptuous supper. And the example set by so high an authority was followed by all orders of the people. The Christmas festivities at Rome seemed to comprise two parts, the religious rites and the heavy *cenone* or supper.

Every Neapolitan would think he failed in his duty if on Christmas Eve he did not dine with his family. On all the other days of the year he might dine at his club or at the cafe, or wherever he pleased, but on Christmas Eve it was obligatory that he should dine at home, when the traditional *vermicelli con vongli* (periwinkles), the succulent *capitone* (eel) appear on the table. The poorest people sell or pawn all they have to celebrate the Santa Natale with a good supper. The balconies display every kind of illumination, fireworks, bombs, etc., and lively talk and boisterous laughter indicate the happiness and good temper of all. On the evening of Christmas Day, on the other hand, the greatest quiet prevails in the streets. All are in-doors, and one might traverse the whole city and not meet with a living soul, or hear a sound unless it be the ringing of a church-bell calling to vespers. The amount of sweets and cakes consumed at the Christmas festival is enormous. Families have been known to order as much as half a ton, out of which they send presents to their friends. The chief sweet is a species of almond toffee, and the cake most in favour is what is called the *panegallo*, which somewhat resembles plum-pudding.

In some of the country villages every *contadino* brings two small oak trees into his house, throws them into the fireplace, covers them with grain and leaves them until all are consumed. In some places these oaks are covered with flowers, red silk ribbons, and gold thread. Large logs of wood are put on the hearth, as the Yule log is in this country,

but with this difference that when it is half burnt it is taken out of the fireplace and religiously preserved, the superstitious people believing that it will keep them from all misfortune during the coming year.

In Sicily the feast of onions used to be the chief peculiarity about Christmas. A fight with onions took place between the villagers, and the victor was presented with a bull. But the most curious custom of all was that which prevailed in a certain province of Italy. The women dragged all the old bachelors they could find into the village church, running them round the sacred edifice and beating them well with their fists. This was done that they might feel ashamed, and take to themselves wives before Christmas came round again.

In Denmark there are strange ceremonies which have come down from pre-Christian times. In those days Odin and Thor and other deities were worshipped by our Saxon ancestors. At Christmas a sheaf of corn was tied to the gables of the houses as a feed to Odin's mighty horse, Sleipner. It was the last sheaf cut in the field. And at the present day, every Yule-tide, the sheaf is still hung out, but now it is for Santa Claus's horse (for the colt of Odin has given place to the patron saint of children) and a person convalescent after a dangerous illness is said to have "given a feed to Death's horse."

In Germany every house has its Christmas-tree, and there is much music and carol singing. There is a pleasant custom all over the fatherland which we must not omit to notice. On Christmas Eve two figures may frequently be seen making their round among the houses of a selected neighbourhood. They are Knecht Ruprecht (Knight Rupert) and Father Christmas. At the door of the house a great bag of fruit, toys, and other good things, is handed to Knecht Ruprecht. Then he enters and inquires after the conduct of the children, and if the parents "give them a good report," Father Christmas, who wears a white dress and a pink or gilt belt, orders the contents of the bag to be emptied on the floor, and while the attention of the children is centred in the scramble, the two figures disappear to perform a similar office at other houses.

In Burgundy, for some weeks before Christmas, the young men and women who can sing, meet together and practice those carols whose chief theme is the coming of the Messiah. They sometimes meet at one house and sometimes at another, taking turns in paying for the chestnuts and white wine, but singing with one common voice the praises of *le petit Jesus*. More or less until Christmas Eve all goes on in this way, and thousands of chestnuts are consumed and gallons of wine are drunk. But to-night supper is provided on a grand scale, and everyone goes in for hearty enjoyment. After supper a circle gathers round the hearth on which an enormous log has been placed, called the

Suche, or Yule-log. And they say to the children, "Look you, if you are good this evening Noel will rain down sugar plums in the night." Meantime little parcels of them are placed under each end of the log, and the children come and pick them up, believing in good faith that the *Suche de Noel* has borne them. Carols are sung to the miraculous Noel. Noel! Noel! Noel! resounds on all sides; it seasons every sauce, it is served up with every course. Of the thousands of canticles which are heard on this famous eve, it is said that ninety-nine in a hundred begin and end with this word. The merry-making and feasting are prolonged until midnight. And then as the bells ring out on the frosty air, the company, who are furnished with a little taper streaked with various colours (the Christmas candle), go through the crowded streets where the lanterns are dancing the Will-o'-the-wisp at the impatient summons of the multitudinous chimes. It is the midnight-mass. And after hearing the Mass they return homeward in tumult and great haste; they salute the Yule-log, they pay homage to the hearth, they sit down at table, and amid songs that reverberate louder than ever feasts far into the morning hours. But all things have an end, and so it is here. The Yule-log burns out, the merry company separate, and each goes to his domicile and his bed.

In south-eastern Europe there are various singular customs observed on Christmas Day. Among the mountaineers of Servia and Montenegro it is a general custom for each family to choose some goodly youth of their acquaintance as a dropper-in for the Christmas Day festivities. He is called the "Polaznik," or Christmas guest. As he approaches the threshold he calls out, "Christ is born," and scatters some corn from his hand inside the dwelling house. "Welcome," cries the house-mother who stands at the door to meet him, "of a truth He is born," and she throws at the same time a handful of corn in his face. The Polaznik now draws near the Yule-fire, and taking up the remains of the chief log, which is burning on the hearth, knocks it against the cauldron hook above so as to make the sparks fly, saying as he does so, "So may our Domachin (house-father) have all good luck and happiness." He then, with the same log, strikes the embers below, saying as the sparks fly again, "Even so may our brother the Domachin, have oxen and cows and goats and sheep and all good luck." After this he places an orange on the end of the log and on the orange a small coin, which the Domachitz (housewife) promptly takes possession of. In return for this gift she presents the Polaznik before he leaves with the leggings and socks in use among these mountaineers, and along with them a Christmas loaf, or "pogatch," as it is called. The Polaznik now asks his host, the Domachin, what kind of Christmas he has, and whether he is merry? To which he replies, "Christmas has come as

a kind guest, never better, my brother; all have enough and all are merry." Immediately the new-comer exchanges the kiss of peace with every member of the family, and then, sitting down beside the hearth, is pledged with wine and raki to his heart's content. Other ceremonies of an elaborate and singular character are gone through, and so the day ends. A Montenegrin song says,

"Without eyesight there is no day!

Without Christmas no true feast!
The flame shoots up brighter than 'tis wont,
Before the fire the straw is strewed,
The Yule-logs are laid across the fire,
The guns are fired, the roast meat turns,
The guzlas twang, and they play the kolo.
The grandsires dance with the grandchildren,

Three generations turn round in the dance.
You would say they were all the same
year's children!

For the joy and the mirth levels all.

But what most falls to my taste
Is that each must be toasted!"

On New Year's Day, which is called by the serfs "Little Christmas," the head of the roasted pig or sheep, which was the chief dish of the Christmas feast, is eaten. A particular kind of cake is made for this day called in the cities and towns "St. Basil's cake," but in the villages "the cake for the she-bear," for what reason we cannot tell. The evening is spent by the young people in various modes of divination, especially in forecasting their marriage future—a source of great interest and amusement to all.

In the Highlands of Scotland (to come back to our own country) curious out-of-door games were played on Christmas Day, and peculiar sorts of cakes and thick broth were eaten. In some places a carp was the chief dish at supper, and a boar's head served on a silver platter for dinner, and the festivities were often kept up from Christmas to Twelfth Night. In the Isle of Man people sat up all night, and the next morning they hunted and killed a wren, and carrying the little bird to church, buried it with mock solemnities. This custom still prevails in the Celtic parts of Ireland, only instead of carrying the dead wren to church, they carry it round, tied on a bough to the principal houses, singing at each the doggerel lines—

"The wren, the wren, the king of all birds,
St. Stephen's Day was caught in the furze;
Although she is small, her family is great,
Rise up, landlady, and give us a treat."

It would be easy to add a variety of suggestive customs from other lands pertaining to this joyous season of Christmas, but to do so would be to prolong our paper to an inordinate length. And therefore we here make an end by wishing all our readers a "Merry Christmas and a Happy New Year."

WILLIAM COWAN.

MARSH MARIGOLDS.

By ADA M. TROTTER, Author of "My Lady Marjorie," etc.

CHAPTER X.

ETHEL HAS THE COURAGE OF HER OPINIONS.

MARION saw no more of the eccentric Count that day. Everyone seemed to take it as a matter of course that he should be free to join the family circle, or absent himself at his pleasure, and, although he was anything but a non-entity, no one made any remark did he fail to put in an appearance. Marion,

who was much impressed by his high-bred manner, and whose quick eye discerned perhaps the best in those around her, was not a little surprised to find that her young friends did not like their guest. Even Ethel showed no spark of affection for him, but watched him keenly, with a resentful, almost reproachful expression in her eyes. At times an impatient glance in her direction showed that he was not quite

invulnerable to this incessant mute entreaty; still it made no apparent change in his uniformly courteous manner to his niece.

Girl like, Marion conceived an enthusiastic admiration for Ethel; being much impressed by her melancholy expression, and the slight mystery which seemed to pervade her actions. As though under a ban, absorbed in sad thoughts, Ethel not only shunned all gaiety, but at times