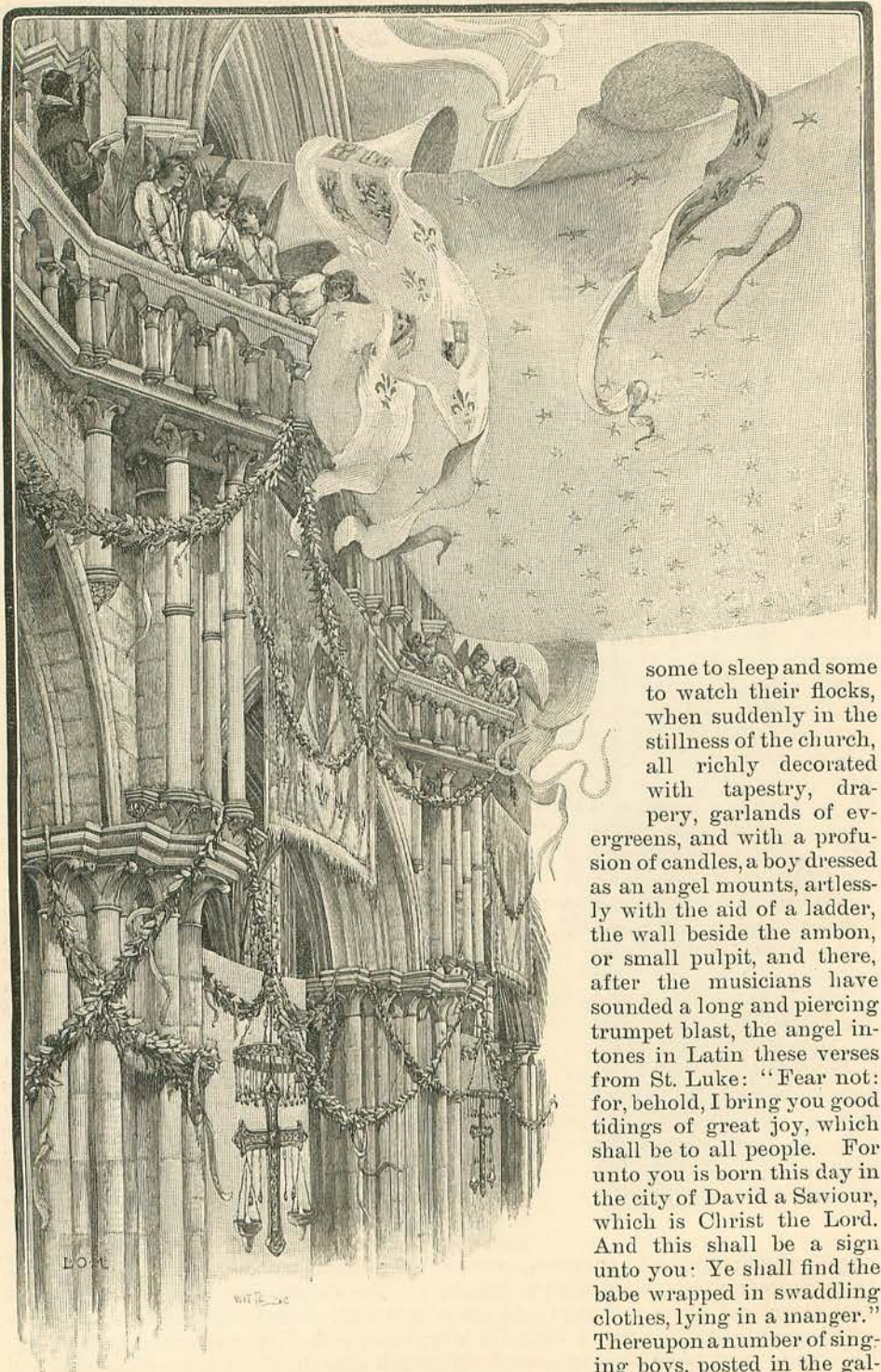


A
 CHRISTMAS
 MYSTERY
 IN THE
 15TH CENTURY
 BY
 THEODORE CHILD

LET us go back in imagination some six hundred years. It is Christmas night. In every town in Europe the bells are ringing merri-

ly, and the people, noble and simple alike, are streaming toward the church or cathedral, each family or group preceded by its lantern-bearer, for street lights are few and far between. We will suppose ourselves in Chester, in Rouen, in Verona, or in Seville—the name and the place matter little, the mediæval Christmas usages from the eleventh to the sixteenth century being the same all over western Europe. Matins have just ended with the “Te Deum,” and there is a movement of expectation in the church and a rustling of feet, for before the celebration of mass we are to assist at the dramatic Office of the Shepherds. Behind and above the altar is placed the manger or *crèche*, and beside it an image of Saint Mary. Five canons of the first rank, or at least their vicars, wearing the sacerdotal tunic, and

over it the amice, or linen gown, represent the shepherds, and form a group in the transept in front of the entrance to the choir. The shepherds carry crooks, and have with them real sheep and dogs, and attendants with musical instruments and rustic offerings of fruit. We may imagine how picturesque and impressive this Office of the Shepherds must have been in some Lombardian church where the architecture lent itself to effective pantomime. We may figure to ourselves the shepherds, feigning



some to sleep and some to watch their flocks, when suddenly in the stillness of the church, all richly decorated with tapestry, drapery, garlands of evergreens, and with a profusion of candles, a boy dressed as an angel mounts, artlessly with the aid of a ladder, the wall beside the ambon, or small pulpit, and there, after the musicians have sounded a long and piercing trumpet blast, the angel intones in Latin these verses from St. Luke: "Fear not: for, behold, I bring you good tidings of great joy, which shall be to all people. For unto you is born this day in the city of David a Saviour, which is Christ the Lord. And this shall be a sign unto you: Ye shall find the babe wrapped in swaddling clothes, lying in a manger." Thereupon a number of singing boys, posted in the galleries in the clerestory of the

CHILDREN AS ANGELS SINGING IN THE CLERE STORY.

cathedral—*aux voûtes de l'église*, says an old Rouen manuscript—and representing the "multitude of the heavenly host," begin to sing, "Glory to God in the highest, and on earth peace, good will toward men." And from the indications of the old manuscripts, and from the judgments of competent critics, we may conclude that the music which accompanied this Office was very grand and simple, for the plain song was supplemented by special melodies, and the music of brass and of stringed instruments was employed besides that of the organ.

Meanwhile the shepherds enter by the great gate of the choir, and advance slowly toward the altar and the manger, chanting a rhymed Latin hymn, "Pax in terris." Arrived at the manger, they are met by two priests of the first rank, wearing the long white dalmatica and figuring two midwives, who ask them, "Quem queritis in præsepe, pastores dicite?" (Say, shepherds, whom seek ye in the manger?) And the shepherds reply, "Salvatorem, Christum Dominum." (We seek the Saviour, Christ the Lord, the babe wrapped in swaddling clothes, according to the angel's words.) Thereupon the two priests figuring midwives draw a curtain and show the child Jesus to the shepherds, and bid them announce the Nativity to the people. The shepherds kneel in adoration, and salute the Virgin with a rhymed Latin hymn. After which they return processionally through the choir, singing: "Alleluia! Alleluia! sing all his coming, and say with the prophet, Unto us a child is born." These words form the Introit of the Christmas mass, which begins immediately, the shepherd-priests directing the choir—*pastores regunt chorum*, says the Rouen manuscript—and reading the lessons from the lectern.

This detail is interesting because it shows that the bond which united the above and similar dramas to the liturgy was so close that the personages of the drama remained in view, and even in action, during the course of divine service. It was, as it were, an Office of the Shepherds intercalated in the usual Office of Christmas. But some may think how impious to introduce these mummeries into the very sanctuary, and to set up the scenery of a stage play behind the high altar. Let us not judge too harshly, but having reconstituted the material aspect of a liturgical drama, let us endeavor to

realize the spirit in which our mediæval ancestors witnessed such spectacles.

Nowadays we are accustomed to consider a church simply as a "house of prayer," according to the terms of the gospel. But there was a time when the church was not only a house of prayer, but also the principal and almost the only centre of intellectual and moral life. As the historian Michelet has put it, "The church was then the domicile of the people. The dwelling-house, the miserable hut, to which man returned at night was only a momentary shelter. In plain truth, there was only one house, and that was the house of God. It was not a vain word that the church possessed the right of asylum; it was then the universal asylum; social life had taken refuge there entirely." In the times of which we are speaking, about the twelfth century of our era, to employ the poetic phrase of an old chronicler, Raoul Glaber, it seemed "as if the whole world had shaken off the rags of antiquity to put on the white robe of the church," and that white robe took the splendid form of the cathedrals of Reims, Rouen, Cologne, Salisbury—edifices whose storied walls expounded with all the charm and sincerity of primitive art the history of the Fall and of the Redemption of man, the lives of the saints, the images and actions of heroes. The religion which presided over the construction of these edifices had the pretension not only of guiding man to his salvation in the world to come, but also of penetrating his whole nature in this present world, of enlightening his mind, of comforting his soul, and of charming his eyes. Hence the arts of sculpture, of painting, and of music became tributary to the church, and helped to enrich the exterior and public forms of worship, or, in other words, the liturgy. And, in order still further to fascinate and charm the worshipper, the delicate and poetic symbolism of the liturgy was materialized: the frescoes and bass-reliefs on the cathedral walls were animated, and the latent dramatic elements of the church ceremonial were developed in the form of naïve dramatic representations, such as the Shepherds, the Adoration of the Magi, the Massacre of the Innocents, the Resurrection, and other similar pieces, which were enacted in churches and monasteries, especially during the feasts of Christmas and Easter.

As the victory of Christianity became more complete, and the wealth and influence of the church more extended, the service of the church grew more pompous, and the dramatic element more considerable. At first this dramatic element takes the form of a simple trope interpolated in the liturgy, the words in Latin being borrowed from Scripture or from the canonical tradition. In the next phase of the liturgical drama short pieces of verse are intercalated in the sacred prose. Then gradually the verse gains ground, the prose diminishes in quantity, the purely liturgical elements disappear, and refrains and catch lines in the vulgar tongue are introduced. Finally the liturgical drama, in France at least, develops into a composition of very complicated and varied versification, written half in Latin and half in French or Provençal. Thus we see that in western Europe, as in ancient Greece, the stage was born of the ceremonies of public worship; and far from proscribing the theatre, religion may be said not only to have adopted it, but even to have created it; for the liturgical drama is the precursor of the Mystery play, and the Mystery is the first form of the serious national stage in England, France, Italy, Spain, and Germany.

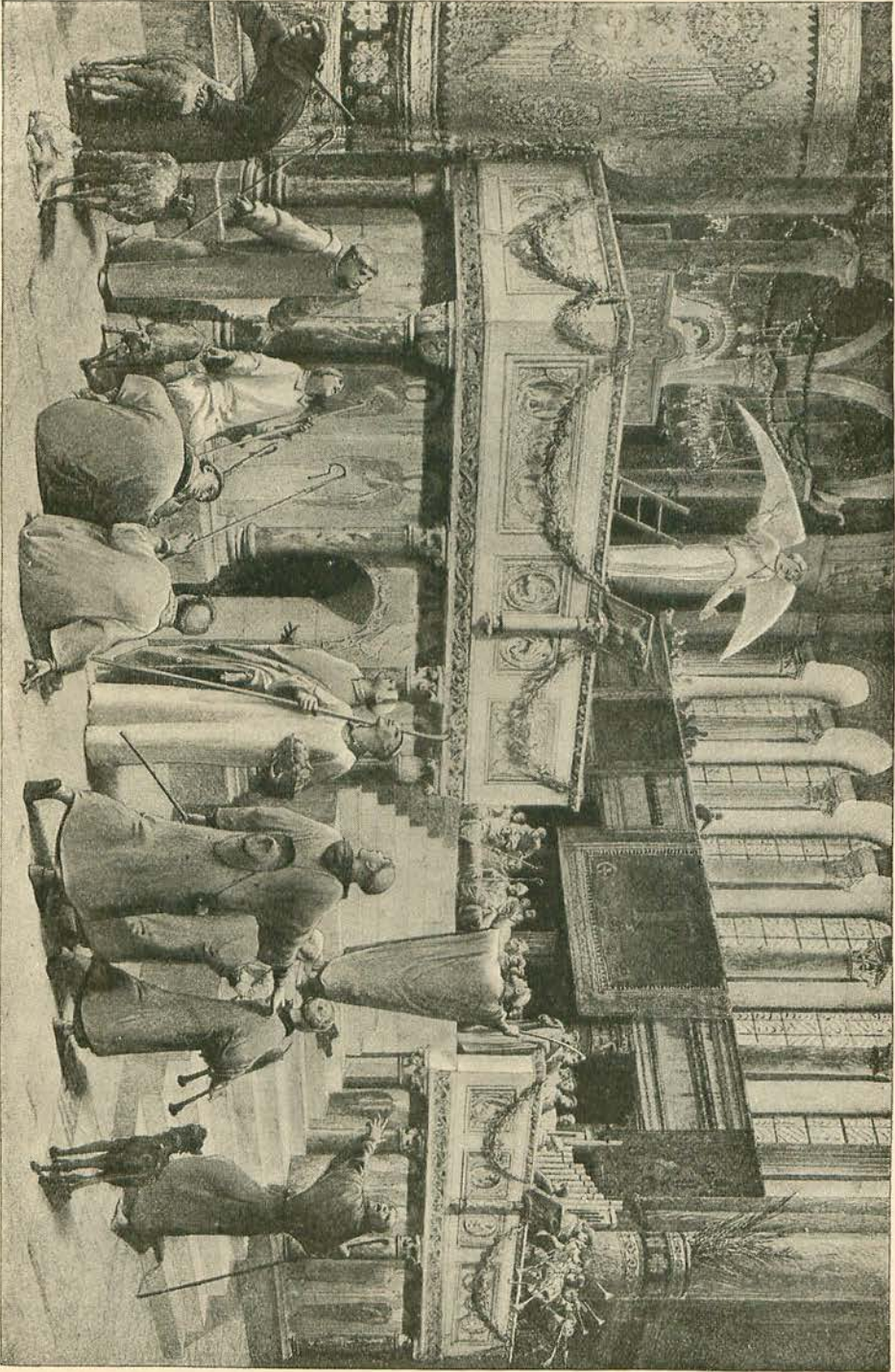
Let us now repair in fancy to the good town of Rouen, in the year 1473, we will say. Seven citizens of high degree have met in the house of one of their number, a canon perhaps of the cathedral, or, at any rate, a great clerk, doctor in one of the universities of the kingdom, and a most religious and learned person, celebrated in the city and the whole surrounding country for his literary labors both in the Latin and in the vulgar tongue. The object of the meeting is most grave. It is nearly twenty years since the inhabitants of the city have been edified and rejoiced by the representation of a Mystery play. The souvenir of the last triumphant and magnificent spectacle of the Nativity given on the market-place is waxing feeble in the minds of the people, and it might be desirable to stir up their devotion by a new representation. The times are peaceful, the city is rich, the municipal finances are in a good state. Perhaps a humble and pathetic petition to the sheriffs might enable them to obtain not only the necessary authorization, but also a subvention

of money. The chapter of the cathedral, too, and that of Saint Maclou, cannot refuse to contribute with purse and person to the success of a work so useful to religion. Several citizens have also promised to help with money and drapery; and some of the old costumes and scenery still exist. Thereupon these citizens of high degree bind themselves to pursue their project in spite of all obstacles, and the learned, eloquent, and scientific doctor agrees to furnish the text of a Mystery, say of some ten thousand verses—in short, a Mystery that can be played comfortably in two days.*

The sheriffs, after having been waited upon by the seven citizens who have taken the initiative in this pious work, deliberate, and decide to grant the authorization demanded, vote a handsome

* I have chosen the instance of a French Mystery in preference to an English one because the *mise en scène* was evidently more elaborate and more curious, and also because researches made during the past thirty years in French provincial archives have brought to light many new documents which enable us to conceive with considerable certitude the aspect of the mediæval theatre and the manner in which a Mystery play was mounted. For that matter the history of the Mystery plays of Coventry, Chester, York, London, Cornwall, and Cambridge-shire has been fully treated by many distinguished English writers whose works are easily accessible. In general we may say that the mediæval Mystery plays were much the same in England and in France, only in France the stage, although temporary, was fixed, whereas in England, where the performance of the Mysteries seems to have been the monopoly of trade companies and guilds, who played regularly every year, especially on Corpus Christi Day, the stage was movable, as is described in an old account of the Chester plays; that is to say, "every company had his pagiant, a high scaffold with 2 rowmes, a higher and a lower, upon 4 wheeles. In the lower they apparelled themselves, and in the higher rowme they played, beinge all upon the top, that all behoulders might heare and see them." These pageants or scaffolds were wheeled from street to street for the better advantage of spectators, and the subject of the plays was the story of the Old and the New Testaments "composed into old English ritme."

The texts which I have consulted in the preparation of this essay are too numerous to be cited, but I must especially recognize obligations to M. Marius Sepet and M. Petit de Julleville. The latter author, in his erudite volumes on the mediæval stage, has published the essence of almost every document hitherto discovered which throws any light on the French Mysteries. But my heaviest debt is to M. Luc Olivier Merson, whose profound knowledge of the costumes, usages, life, and spirit of the epoch has enabled him to reconstitute in the illustration of this article a representation of a Mystery in its most minute details. M. Merson might justly add to his name the proud mediæval title of *docteur ès drames sacrés*.



OFFICE OF THE SHEPHERDS.



HEROD PLAYING WITH HIS SCEPTRE.—[SEE PAGE 66.]

subsidy from the municipal funds, and appoint a number of commissioners to act, so far as concerns the financial and police departments, in concert with the citizens who have conceived the scheme. The chapter of the cathedral and that of Saint Maclou have both responded warmly to the appeal of the committee, and have vied with each other in gifts of money, and loans of albs, stoles, dalmaticas, and copes; while the most learned of the canons of both chapters have promised to play the rôles of God the Father, the Saviour, the Virgin Mary, the twelve apostles, the prophets, the Sibyl, Saint John, Herod, and others of considerable importance. Meanwhile the learned doctor, whom we see at work in the initial letter of this essay, has made great progress with his piece, which is an ingenious compilation of the works of his predecessors, adorned with a few new rhymes and a few favorite quotations from Aristotle and the Venerable Bede; and all things being thus far satisfactory, the initiatory committee decide to have a public cry and *monstre* on the coming Sunday, and separate, after having appointed the learned doctor *meneur du jeu*, or master

of the ceremonies, and having nominated its members "superintendents."

The *monstre* was a great event. On the appointed day we may be sure that the streets swarmed with people, and that the crowd was particularly thick in front of the town-hall, whence the cortège was to issue. At eight in the morning the gates were thrown wide open, and there rode forth on prancing horses first of all six trumpeters, who flourished valiantly upon their long brass trumpets, from which hung silken banderolles emblazoned with the arms of the town. Then followed the ordinary town trumpeter and his coadjutor the town crier, commodiously mounted on appropriate steeds, and after them a group of mounted sergeants and archers, wearing the livery both of the king and of the municipality, whose duty it was to preserve order, and to prevent the crowd from breaking in upon the goodly order of the procession. Next came, mounted on fine horses, two heralds, dressed in black velvet, with satin sleeves of gray, yellow, and blue, and their duty was to make the "cry," or proclamation. Behind them, on their mules, two by two, gravely rode those canons of the



CASPAR, ONE OF THE MAGI, WITH HIS SON, A PAGE.—[SEE PAGE 68.]

cathedral and of Saint Maclou who had accepted rôles in the play; and after them, on horses richly caparisoned, rode the learned doctor, *meneur du jeu*, author of the Mystery. In his hand he carried the roll of his precious manuscript, and his visage was radiant with the pride of authorship. At a short distance he was followed by his two lieutenants, and by the superintendents, clad in black velvet doublets and crimson coats, and mounted on horses richly harnessed. The cortège was closed by a number of notable citizens and people of the town, all well mounted, according to their estate and capacity. At each crossing the procession halted, and two of the superintendents rode up to the ordinary town trumpeter and his coadjutor the town crier; the six trumpeters thereupon sounded three times, and after the usual exhortations in the name of the king and the mayor, the proclamation was delivered in pompous and detestable verse, after which a simpler and more intelligible announcement was made in vulgar prose, to the effect that a Mystery was to be represented, and that those who wished to act in the said Mystery were to come on such and such a day to the church of Saint Maclou, where, in the hall of the chapter, they would find commissioners deputed to hear the voices of all candidates. God save the king!

The parts were distributed without further difficulty than attended the selection of those candidates whose voices were strongest and whose pronunciation was clearest, for as the performance was to take place in the open air, it was necessary that the actors should have far-reaching voices in order to make themselves heard by the thousands of spectators who were naturally expected.

As for the actors, we have seen that the leading rôles were undertaken by the clergy, and the rest were accepted by members even of the richer bourgeoisie, but especially by members of the minor bourgeoisie and of the artisan class, which latter supplied the actors for the secondary and mute rôles. All the feminine parts were of course filled by men, according to the usage, and great care was shown by the superintendent in picking out youths with soft voices. It is curious to note that young men often obtained astonishing success in such rôles.

All the documents having been duly signed, and the two or three hundred act-

ors necessary for the performance of the learned doctor's Mystery having been enrolled, the rehearsals began in the hall and in the cloisters obligingly lent by those excellent canons of Saint Maclou; and at the same time the costumes, scenery, and accessories were made, or, where possible, the old accessories were refurbished up and the old costumes repaired.

It was decided that the representation should begin on December 24th, and that eight days before there should be made a second *monstre* by all the actors in full costume, in order to warn the public. And so the last touches were given to the accessories by the scene-painters, the costumes were tried on, the old palm-trees were freshened up, labels were posted to mark the sites of Bethlehem and Nazareth, and Herod, while amusing himself with his new sceptre, was obliged to endure the counsels of that tiresome though learned doctor, who thought only of his text, and cared little about the splendor of Herod's costume. Poor Herod!

However, on the appointed day the trumpeter and the crier rode through the streets, and summoned all who had parts to play in the Mystery to assemble at the hour of noon in the cloister of Saint Maclou, each one in the costume of his rôle. After which "cry" the players met at the said place, where they were set in order, one after the other, all clad, accoutred, armed, appointed, and mounted so very well that better was impossible. And so great and triumphant was the procession that when God and His angels, who closed the cortège, issued from the cloister, Satan and his devils, who headed the parade, had already reached the cathedral Close, which is no small distance away. And so the cortège traversed the town in all directions, amidst the acclamations of the crowd, which gazed with astonishment on the fine trappings and splendid costumes; for, in despite of historic and dramatic truth, even those who played the parts of beggars and valets in the Mystery were dressed sumptuously and magnificently. Considerations of local color and of archaeological exactitude were then unknown, both in scenery and in costume, and in this grand parade we must figure to ourselves that God was dressed in the paraphernalia of a pope, and the Magi in the richest costumes that the wardrobes of the churches and the armories of the town could offer; while



L. C. OUVI
MERSO

PASTOR PRIMUS AND MADELON.—[SEE PAGE 68.]

the shepherds of Bethlehem wore doublets and slashed sleeves of the most approved fifteenth century cut.

In our illustration (page 65) will be seen one of those three kings of the East—Melchior, Caspar, and Balthazar—who came to see the infant Jesus and to offer Him gifts. This is Caspar, impersonated by a wealthy merchant prince of Rouen, who is attended by his son dressed as a page. Caspar is clad in armor, over which he wears a magnificent dalmatica lent by the chapter of the cathedral; around his waist is tied a rich Oriental scarf, which, together with the scimitar, is spoil brought home by some crusader; although his armor and spurs denote a horseman, he carries, for decorative purposes, the round buckler or *rondache* of the foot-soldier; around his neck are chains and jewels, the gala ornaments of his wife; over his hat is placed a spiked crown and a turban laced with strings of pearls; in one hand he carries a golden censer borrowed from the treasury of Saint Maclou, and with the other he grasps a fantastical sceptre, whose Gothic design is intermingled with souvenirs of imperial Rome. His little son, who stands in front of the family greyhound, and holds on his fist a hooded hawk, and on his left shoulder his mother's pet monkey, is worthy of our attention as being the very pink and mirror of fifteenth century fashion. The only fantastical detail in his costume is the turban, studded with big stones, which is wound round his felt hat, with a view to giving him an Eastern air. The rest of his dress—his velvet coat, his fur-trimmed mantle of stout silk brocaded with pomegranates, his hose, and his one long boot of doeskin—all this is the height of *chic*.

The shepherd whose image is here depicted, like King Caspar, has been decked out in superfine clothing, high-life shoes, soft doeskin hose, a dalmatica of rich brocaded silk, a fur-lined cape, a wallet trimmed with fur, and a felt cap starred with a big jewel; while on his fingers he wears rings in profusion—all of them doubtless lent by the treasury of the cathedral. His crook is adorned with streamers of ribbon and a branch of holly, and the Druidical mistletoe has been honored with a place on the bagpipes. But who is that little maiden so quaintly dressed, who is arraying a patient ewe with garlands of Christmas roses? This is Mad-

elon, the little shepherdess, whose history has been prettily told by a modern French poet, Émile Blémont. Madelon came with the shepherds to adore the infant Jesus, but being poor, she had no present to offer, and so she stood back behind the shepherds and the Magi and wept and prayed. And the angel Gabriel came down from heaven and said to Madelon, "Little shepherdess, why do you weep and why do you pray?" And Madelon answered, with quivering voice: "Alas! I have no present to offer to the infant Jesus. If I could only give Him some roses. He has not a single flower. But it is freezing, and spring is far away. Good angel, woe is me!"

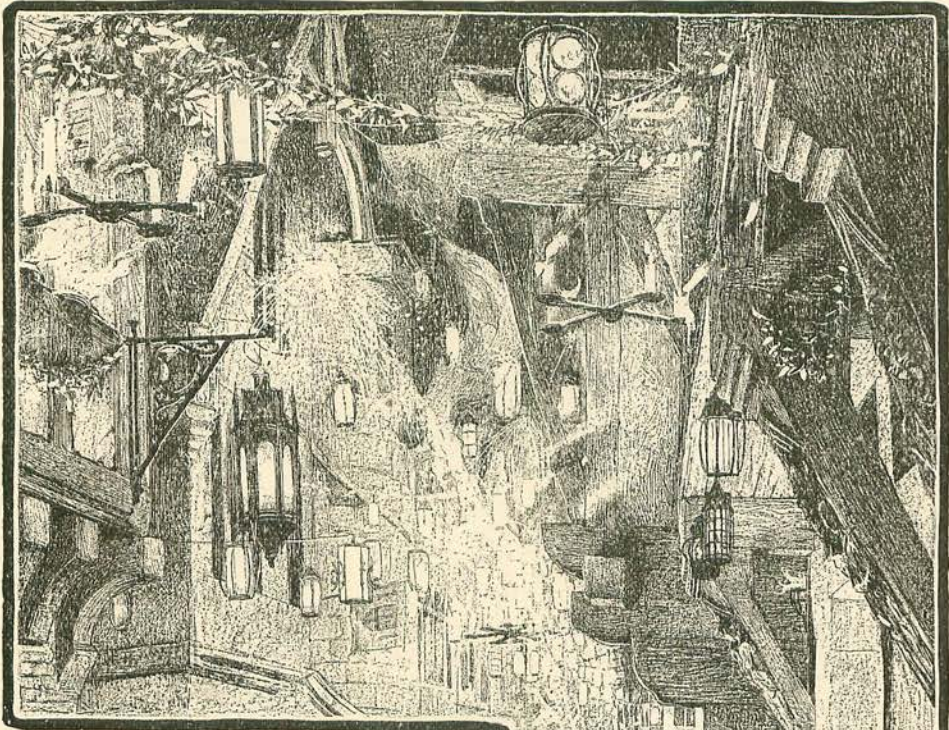
And Gabriel took Madelon by the hand and led her out; and when they were outside a golden light seemed to float around them. Then Gabriel struck the frozen earth with his rod, and behold the ground was covered with fresh flowers, of which Madelon gathered a posy and gave to the infant Jesus. In memory of this miraculous origin of the Christmas rose, Madelon is decking her ewe with fresh garlands, and she herself is tricked out with brocades and jewelled kirtles, and her head-dress is composed of a tall peaked *hennin*, the very height of the fashion, and of a starched muslin veil, which happily shelters her lovers from the too vehement ardor of her beauteous eyes. How artlessly and sincerely these good shepherds must have played their parts, and how quaint must have been the effect when they approached the manger, Primus Pastor playing the pipes, while Secundus and Tertius Pastor sang, as in one of the Coventry pageants:

"Doune from heaven, from heaven so hie,
Of angels there came a great companie.
With mirthe and joy and great solemnitye
They sange, terly, terlow;
So mereli the sheppards ther pipes can blow!"

As for little Madelon, she would doubtless join her voice to those of the women who sang a lullaby-lament in this strain:

"Lully, lulla, thow littel tine child;
By, by, lully, lullay, thow littell tyne child;
By, by, lully, lullay.
O sisters too! how may we do
For to preserve this day
This pore yongling, for whom we do singe
By, by, lully, lullay.

"Herod, the King, in his raging,
Chargèd he hath this day
His men of might, in his owne sight,
All yonge children to slay.



ILLUMINATIONS IN THE STREETS.

"That wo is me, pore child for the!
 And ever morne and day,
 For thi parting nether say nor singe,
 By, by, lully, lullay."

The day after the final parade the scaffolds were taken possession of by the actors and the stage-managers, and by the citizens who had undertaken to fit out the stage with hangings and furniture. The mayor caused to be published such police measures as he judged necessary in the circumstances; notably, he prohibited the exercise of all mechanic trades during the two days of the play, and ordered that all shops should be closed, except those of the sellers of food and drink, who were requested to set up temporary counters on the market-place for the convenience of the spectators, both during and after the representation. And in order to enable people to go to see the Mystery without fear for their property, the mayor announced that during the hours of the representation of the Mystery the gates of the city would be closed, armed patrols of





SCENE IN THE MYSTERY PLAY—THE ARRIVAL AT BETHLEHEM.

archers would parade the streets to watch over the empty houses and catch the thieves, and two watchers would be posted on the tower of the belfry. The crier also published the desire of the mayor and of the sheriffs that on the eve and during the three days of the representation citizens would hang lanterns on their houses in sign of rejoicing, and also in order to light up the streets for the greater convenience of the multitude of visitors who were expected from the neighboring towns and villages. Finally the bishop caused to be announced in all the churches of the diocese that the hours of divine service would be changed during the two days of the representation, in order that the faithful might be deprived neither of their accustomed prayers nor of the edifying spectacle of this Mystery of the "Incarnacion et Nativité de nostre saulveur et redempteur Jesuchrist."

At last, we will suppose, the great day has come; it is between seven and eight in the morning, and there is an immense crowd in the New Market-place when the seventy-eight leading actors, and the hundred and fifty figurants—angels and devils—preceded by the learned doctor, and accompanied by the music of trumpets, clarions, drums, organs, harps, and other instruments, make their appearance in procession, and take up their position on the stage.

But first of all, in order that we may better comprehend and follow the performance of this famous Mystery, let us examine the construction of the theatre, and the sitting and other accommodation provided for the spectators. The New Market-place formed a vast quadrilateral, from the sides of which radiated the quaint and narrow streets of old Rouen. Along the northern side were erected the *establies*, or stage, or "scaffold," as it is called in English Mysteries; and along the southern side, facing the stage, stand other scaffolds, or "pentes," forming an amphitheatre, and surmounted by a row of private boxes. On these pentes were the reserved seats, and in the centre was a richly decorated box, emblazoned with the arms of the town, and adorned with a canopy of gold and purple, beneath which sat the mayor, the sheriffs, the bishop, and the deans and the canons of the chapters of the cathedral and of St. Maclou. The common people, who were not rich enough to pay for reserved seats, swarmed in the intermediate space between the tribunes and the fence which enclosed the northern side of the market-place reserved for the stage and the actors; and in order that the public might sit down at ease, all this intermediate space was strewn with straw. Finally, every window in the market-place and in the neighboring streets, every gable, and every cozy vantage-point near a

warm chimney, was of course occupied, and from this crowd of spectators, which numbered some sixteen thousand people, there rose a terrible clamor and murmuring, and only those who were near the stage could hear the supplication of the learned doctor, shouting in his prologue:

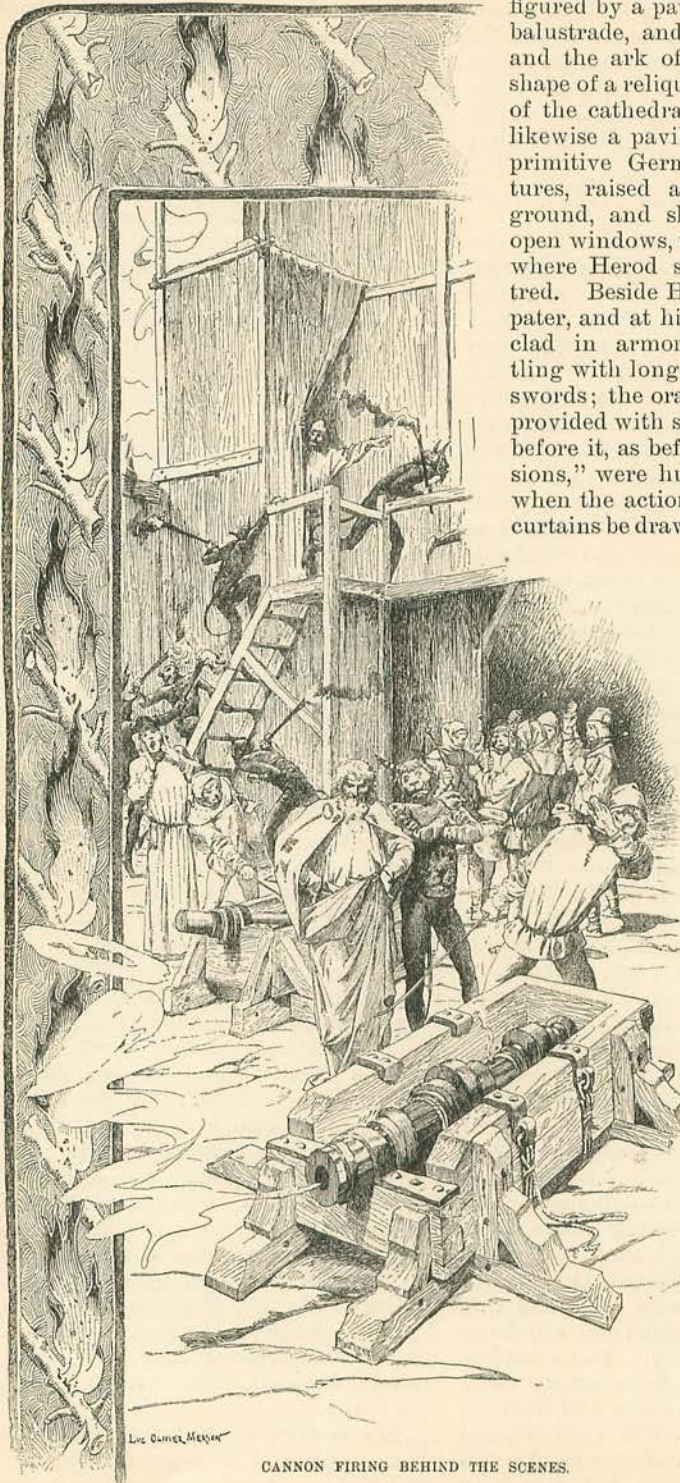
“Silete! Silete! Silentum habeatis,
Et per Dei Filium pacem faciatis.”

The stage may be figured as an immense floor, sloping slightly, like a modern stage, and about one hundred feet square, thus presenting a superficies of ten thousand square feet. This space comprises two distinct parts—the “mansions,” “lieux,” “sieges,” or “loges,” and the stage proper, or *parloir*, or, in other words, the open space in front of the “mansions.” These “mansions” figured the edifices or towns where the action successively took place, for in a Mystery play all the scenery was set when the public arrived, and remained, together with the actors, simultaneously and uninterruptedly visible until the end of the performance. Nowadays, when we play a piece in five or six acts, the scenery is changed five or six times, but successively. In a Mystery the different scenes or places, however numerous, were set and disposed in advance all together and at the same time. The stage was, so to speak, the materialization of those mediæval frescoes, pictures, and bass-reliefs where we see represented in the different planes of the same expanse the different phases of the life of a man, or the different incidents of some event, which, though happening successively, are grouped in such a manner that the spectator embraces them all at a glance. The stage on which the Mysteries were performed was arranged in a similar manner; the scenery was permanent and the action mobile. Twenty times in a single day’s performance the action changed place, and passed successively to the different localities where it was supposed to happen. The problem of having so many scenes set simultaneously on a single stage gave rise to the hypothesis that the stage of the Mystery plays was several stories high, and that it resembled a tall house from which the front had been removed. The absurdity of this hypothesis has been demonstrated recently by M. Paulin Paris, and from the ingenious conjectures of this *savant*, and from the examination of documents—not only written documents, but especially

tapestries, pictures, miniatures, sculptures in ivory, and even iron-work—we can now explain the general construction of the mediæval stage with considerable certitude.

We may imagine that the “mansions” were disposed as follows: in the centre Paradise, and then, beginning at the west end of the stage, Nazareth, with the house of the parents of Our Lady and the oratory where the Virgin says her prayers. By the side of Nazareth, separated by a distance of a few feet only, was Bethlehem, and the inn, bearing the name and sign of the Fleur-de-Lis, where Joseph will come to beg hospitality for Our Lady, and doff his cap respectfully to the surly innkeeper, who will appear at the window, lantern in hand, to indicate that the time is supposed to be night. In our illustration M. Merson has depicted this episode of the play with charming naïveté, and shown us also the ubiquitous doctor standing with his manuscript unrolled, ready to prompt the various actors. The doctor might or might not be visible to the public; he would in all probability be masked by the next “mansion,” which represented the stable and the manger, near which were placed an ox and an ass, ingeniously contrived with mechanism to allow them to kneel before the infant Jesus at the given moment. Next to the stable were “mansions” representing the receipt of customs, the field where the shepherds guard their flocks and make believe to play upon pipes. Then followed Jerusalem with the Temple, Herod’s palace, the golden gate, the houses of Simeon, Joseph of Arimathea, Nicodemus, Zacchæus, etc.; and beyond was Rome, the Temple of Apollo, where a pagan bishop was seen adoring idols, the home of the Sibyl, the lodging of the princes of the synagogue, the chamber of the Roman emperor and his throne, and finally the Capitol. Next came Hell, in the guise of an immense mouth opening and closing with a curtain as need required, and the limbo of the fathers in the form of a square tower with iron gratings. In all, the scenery of this Mystery comprised some thirty different places, disseminated over four towns, namely, Nazareth, Jerusalem, Bethlehem, and Rome.

Now it must not be supposed that the stage town was a large structure. A wall and a gate and a few gables sufficed

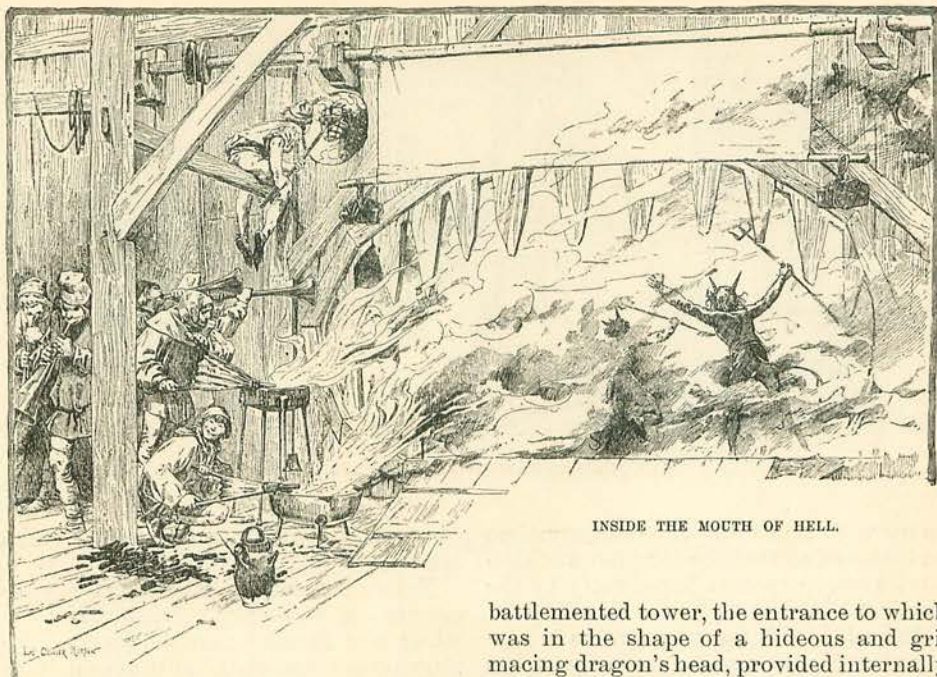


CANNON FIRING BEHIND THE SCENES.

to indicate Nazareth; the Temple was figured by a pavilion surrounded by a balustrade, and containing the altar and the ark of the covenant, in the shape of a reliquary lent by the chapter of the cathedral; Herod's palace was likewise a pavilion, such as we see in primitive German and Flemish pictures, raised a few steps from the ground, and showing through large open windows, upon a dais, the throne where Herod sat crowned and sceptred. Beside Herod was his son Antipater, and at his feet were his guards, clad in armor, helmeted, and bristling with long lances and formidable swords; the oratory of the Virgin was provided with stoles and cushions, and before it, as before most of the "mansions," were hung curtains, and only when the action required would these curtains be drawn, and the "mansions"

"sodeynly unclose," as the English texts say. All the mansions were very fair to see, gayly painted, richly furnished, and draped by the munificence and diligence of notable citizens, and in front of them, running the whole length of the stage, was a good free space or promenade, which is called the *parloir*.

Of Paradise and of Hell we must speak more at length, for a fine Paradise was the triumph of the fifteenth-century stage carpenter, and the Paradise of this present Mystery was very finely disposed in a grand pavilion two stories high and dominating the whole stage; the upper floor was open to the sky, and in the middle was a golden throne surrounded by golden rays, in which God sat, an attentive and



INSIDE THE MOUTH OF HELL.

permanent spectator of the play. At his feet were Peace and Mercy on the right, and Justice and Truth on the left, each figure allegorically arrayed. And God, who was impersonated by the tallest of the canons of Saint Maclou, was dressed like a pope; on his head was a tiara, in his right hand he held a sceptre, and in his left the globe surmounted by the cross, symbol of the universe. Around and behind the throne were arranged semicircularly in tiers, one above the other, nine orders of angels, clad in albs and stoles,* and with wings attached to their shoulders; and behind the angels, and concealed by them from the public, were the organ and the musicians and singers, for these angelic choirs were naturally charged with the musical parts of the performance. But as most of the angels were chosen for their beautiful faces from amongst the youths and boys of the town, it happened that few of them had musical talent, and that was why the real players of instruments and singers were hidden behind the scenes, while the beautiful angels were only to make believe (*font manière de jouer*).

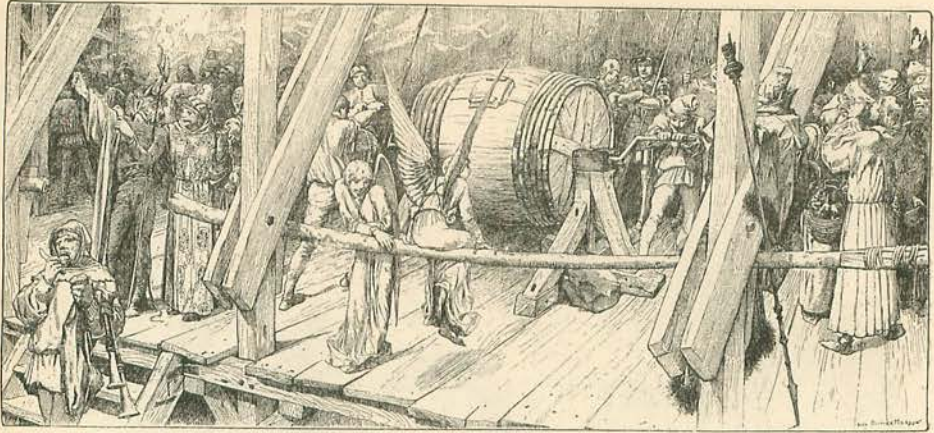
As for Hell, it was figured by a square

* Itm payd for waschyng y^e angells albs, iijd. Itm pd for mendyng y^e angells surplises & wasshyng, iijd.—*Coventry Leet-Book*.

battlemented tower, the entrance to which was in the shape of a hideous and gracing dragon's head, provided internally with braziers and chimneys, so that fire and smoke might be vomited from the mouth, nostrils, eyes, and ears. The inside of Hell was partly visible through lateral gratings, and the devils were constantly making a terrible noise with drums, trumpets, cannons, barrels full of stones, and other noisy engines. The French Hell mouth was most hideous, and corresponded exactly with the Hell mouth of the English Mysteries, as described in Sackville's Induction to the *Mirrou for Magistrates*:

"An hideous hole all vaste, withouten shape,
Of endlesse depth, orewhelm'd with ragged
stone,
With ugly mouth, and griesly iawes doth gape,
And to our sight confounds itself in one."

This time the Hell mouth was most terrible, and our learned doctor had suggested many details, which the painter had most excellently carried out. The costumes of Lucifer and of his attendant devils had also been particularly attended to. Some were clad in skins of wolves, calves, and rams; some had sheep's heads, and others the heads of oxen skilfully imitated by an ingenious artificer; while round their waists they wore belts hung with grelots and bells, and some carried black rods full of squibs, and others smoky firebrands; and both big devils and little devils were very active and nimble, and



THE THUNDER BARREL—BEHIND THE SCENES.

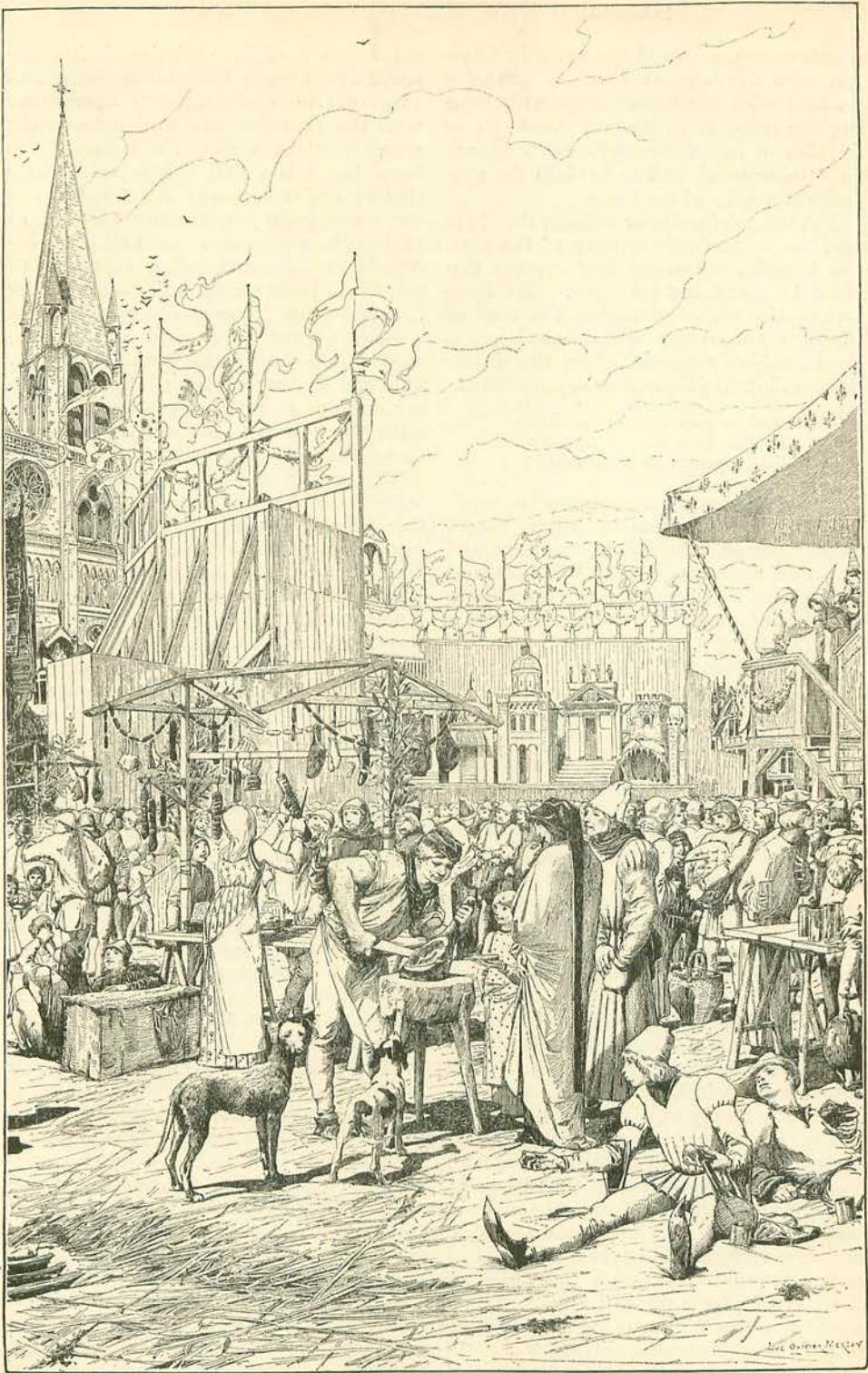
many were said to be excellent tumblers and leapers, so that the interludes of *diableries* were expected impatiently by the public.*

Indeed there is no exaggeration in saying that for the grosser majority of the spectators the tricks and antics of Satan and his attendants formed the chief attraction of a Mystery, and for the actors themselves the noise and fun that went on inside Hell mouth behind the scenes appear to have been singularly fascinating. What joy for the boys to blow up the charcoal fires for burning the pitch and brimstone, and to hold baskets of fire in the eye holes of the Hell head! With what glee the devils bounded through the clouds of smoke that rolled forth from Hell mouth! Even Lucifer himself, and Saint Peter, must come to see the firing of the wooden cannons bound round with iron rings, and so absorbed are they in this interesting spectacle that they pay no heed to the voice of the scientific doctor, who is calling to them to hurry on to the stage to play their parts. As for the thunder barrel, even the white angels come down from Paradise to hear the stones rattle inside it; and for some reason or other the grown-up actors find the noisy vicinity of the thunder machine a

convenient place for taking a drink and a bite.

Yet a word or two concerning the management of the stage. Dominating the whole was Paradise; on the level of the stage proper, and distributed over it, were the "mansions"; at one end was Hell mouth and the pit of Hell, which rested on the pavement of the market-place, while the level of the stage was about eight feet above the ground. Below the stage thus formed a vast room, where was installed the machinery for the traps, counterpoises, and other strange engines and "secrets," as they were called; and behind the stage also were windlasses and counterpoises, for the stage carpenters of Rouen were very skilful, and not only did they make mechanical kneeling oxen and asses, but very curious *voleries*, or *voulleries*, for ascensions or flying visits of angels; wheels *secrètement faites dessus un pivot à vis*, for raising souls into Paradise; and many sorts of traps, called by metonymy "apparitions," and used for sudden appearances or disappearances, for the substitutions of persons, and for passing up the manikins to be tortured or beheading, as we often read in old account-books, *Item un faux corps pour la decollation*. As a rule, the actors remained in view and *en scène*, even when their rôles were interrupted or finished, the principal characters abiding in their "mansions," and the secondary characters grouped on each side of the stage in convenient places, and standing "pour honorer le jeu," according to the directions of the learned doctor. Only those actors disappeared through the traps.

* In the expenses of the English Mysteries in the old Leet-Books, Hell mouth invariably figures. Thus in the Coventry books for the Drapers' Pageant of Doomsday we read: "1537. Itm paide for paynting and making new hell hede, xijd. 1538. Itm payd for mendyng new hell hede, vjd. 1565. p'd to Jhon Huyt for paynting of hell mowthe, xvjd. 1567. p'd for making hell mouth and cloth for hyt, iijs. Itm payd for keypyng of fyer at hell mothe, iiijd."



AN ENTR'ACTE FOR DINNER, SHOWING THE STAGE.

whose presence would too directly interfere with the dramatic illusion. Finally we have a few *écriteaux*, or placards, bearing the name of Jerusalem, Nazareth, or Bethlehem, in order to indicate the principal "mansions," and to explain the general geography of the stage.

But the *protocolle* or *acteur*, that is to say, the author or arranger of the text, our friend the learned doctor, steps forward to speak his prologue. He bows and gesticulates, but amidst the roar of the crowd his voice is not heard, and a good half-hour passes before the doctor becomes intelligible and honey-mouthed.

"Doulces gens, un peu de silence
Doulces gens, un peu escoutez
Pésiblement, sans noise faire."

Thus he begins a long sermon in verse, full of quotations from the Bible, Virgil, Saint Thomas, Boethius, Hippocrates, and Aristotle of course; and in this discourse he explains the scenes that are about to be represented, draws the useful moral from them, sketches a plan of the drama, exhorts the people to virtue and piety, and after devoutly reciting an Ave Maria, he turns to the actor who holds the rôle of Balaam, and signifies to him to begin the play. Balaam, mounted on his ass, advances and prophesies in verse, and after him David, Isaiah, Jeremiah, Ezekiel, and Daniel—the testimony of the prophets of Christ having remained the traditional beginning of the Mysteries of the Nativity. After having finished his prophecy, each prophet is seized by the devils, carried off, and respectfully precipitated into the Limbo of the Patriarchs. Finally comes the Sibyl, who steps upon the stage, and prophesies the coming of the Son of Man and the last judgment, *teste David cum Sibylla*. Next comes a scene in Limbo, where Adam laments his fate, and a scene in Heaven, where the four virtues, Truth, Justice, Mercy, and Peace, dispute with such vivacity over the lot of man that Peace at last cries to them to be calm, for it is not becoming to see such noise and storming amongst virtues. However, the redemption of mankind through the death of the Son of God is decided upon. Thereupon a solemn chorus of angels celebrates the approaching salvation of man, the choruses singing a verse, the air of which the players of instruments repeated after them, and many compli-

cated and beautiful variations being executed by the tenor, the counter-tenor, and by duos, trios, and quartettes, alternating with the choruses and the instruments, which are the violin, the trumpet, the harp, the rebec, and the organ. After this beautiful harmony the learned doctor, *meneur du jeu*, coming forward as *protocolle*, announces the half-hour *entracte* for dinner, begging that all will remain in their places, and eat and drink heartily while the minstrels play.

After dinner the learned doctor delivered only a very short versified sermon, and the Mystery continued with the Annunciation and the Visitation, which, with the musical and other interludes, ended the first day's programme.

The second day of the Mystery begins with the order of Augustus to number the inhabitants of his empire, which causes Joseph to quit Nazareth and go to Bethlehem. At this point Ludin, the "fol pasteur," comes upon the stage, and Anathot, the "pasteur niays," who performs all sorts of antic tricks and pleasant inventions, and speaks many grotesque histories and farces, to amuse the public. Then, together with the other shepherds, they sing rustic songs. Next we see Mary and Joseph enter the stable, and Joseph expresses his sorrow to think that Mary will have to give birth to the Saviour in such a miserable spot. But the Virgin resignedly replies, "It pleases God that it be so" (*Il plait à Dieu qu'ainsi se face*). "Alas!" continues Joseph, "where are those grand castles, those fine towers with battlements, so pleasantly built? And the Son of God is here so poorly lodged." And Mary replies, "*Il plait à Dieu qu'ainsi se face*." Then Joseph resumes, "Where are those halls so finely painted with diverse colors and paved with tiles, and so pleasant that it is a consolation to behold them?" And Mary: "*Il plait à Dieu qu'ainsi se face*." And to each regret of Joseph, who enumerates the delights of chambers hung with gold-embroidered tapestry, and of beds richly decked with rare furs, Mary replies, with sweet resignation, "*Il plait à Dieu qu'ainsi se face*."

Meanwhile Jesus is born; the angels salute him with songs; his mother adores him; the idols fall down in the pagan temples, and Hell mouth opens to display the rage of the demons. Lucifer asks Asmodeus news of the false gods, and

the fury of the devils is manifested by fire and brimstone, and a horrible din of cannons, culverines, and diabolical engines. And after that the angels come into the stable and adore Christ; the shepherds and the Magi follow with their gifts and homage, and the Mystery ends at Rome with the sacrifice that Augustus, by order of the Sibyl, offers to an image of the Virgin. Whereupon the doctor delivers an edifying final sermon, and the chorus sings the *Te Deum*.

The representation having been thus happily concluded, we find that the performers descended from their scaffolds, and, accompanied by the mayor and sheriffs and other notabilities, went on horseback in solemn procession to the church of Saint Maclou, where a "Salut," followed by the *Te Deum*, was sung to thank God for the success of this triumphant Mystery of the "Incarnation and Nativity," the souvenir of which remained long graven in the memory of the inhabitants.

FRAGILE.

AN OUT-DOOR SKETCH.

BY GEORGE H. BOUGHTON.



SITTING under the aromatic shadows of a clump of stunted pines that topped a gentle hill overlooking a curved valley that meandered about a mouldering mediæval town in Brittany. It was not a bad place for two enthusiastic art students, fresh — not so very *fresh* — perhaps, but not long away from the arid asphalt and the blinding white walls of the outer fringe of Paris. We were trying to rest our weary eyes, seared and dazzled by glare and blaze of glittering modernity, by laving them in this restful, moss-grown well of antiquity. Many stirring deeds of arms had surged round the grass-grown battlements of the distant town in days gone by. Steel-clad warriors, following the dread pennon of the mighty Du Guesclin himself, had pranced their armor-plated steeds along that dusty road. Dark-eyed Anne of Brittany had watched from yonder tower many a bloody fray to the bitter