



DECEMBER.

December fell, bath sharp and snell,
 Makes flowers creep in the ground;
 Then man's threescore, both sick and sore,
 No soundness in him found.
 His ears and eez, and teeth of bone,
 All these now to him fall;
 That he may say, both night and day,
 That death shall him assail.

OLD FORM; 1653.

THE FINE OLD ENGLISH GENTLEMAN WELCOMING AT HIS GATE A BAND OF MUMMERS, TO SHARE WITH HIM, AND ENLIVEN, THE FESTIVITIES OF CHRISTMAS.

DECEMBER, the tenth (from *Decem*), and last month of the Alban and early Roman Calendars, is also the last month of the modern year. In this month, the Romans celebrated their *Saturnalia*, when slaves were on an equal footing with their masters. The Saxons, before their conversion to Christianity, called December *Winter-Monath*; but, after that, added to it the appellation of *Haligh*, or *Haly*, in commemoration of the Nativity, which has always been celebrated in this month; although the true time of our Saviour's birth is placed in August.

St. Nicholas's (Dec. 6) legends relate such marvellous instances of his early conformity to the observances of the Roman Church, as entitled him to the appellation of the Boy Bishop. The choice of his representative in every cathedral church in this country continued till the reign of Henry VIII.; and, in many, large provision of money and goods was made for the annual observance of the festival of the Boy Bishop, which lasted from this day until *Innocent's Day* (Dec. 28), during which the utmost misrule and mockery of the most solemn rites were practised and enjoined. Of these customs, the *Montem* at Eton is a corruption: it is celebrated triennially; the last *Montem* was in June, 1844.

Christmas Eve (Dec. 24) is celebrated because, Christmas Day, in the primitive Church, was always observed as the Sabbath Day, and, like it, preceded by an *Eve*, or *Vigil*. Superstition, ever sweet to the soul, was doubly prompted by the sanctity of the season. It was once believed that at midnight, all the cattle in the cow-house would be found kneeling; that bees sang in their hives on Christmas Eve, to welcome the approaching day; and that cocks crowed all night with same object: to the latter, Shakspeare alludes in *Hamlet*—

Some say that even 'gainst that hallow'd season
 At which Our Saviour's birth is celebrated,
 The Bird of Dawning croweth all night long.

The ceremonies and amusements of this season are too numerous for us to describe. The Waits, or more properly *Wakes*, usually commence their nocturnal serenades about the middle of the month, and play nightly, till Christmas Day. Although the music now played is secular, the custom originated evidently in commemoration of the early salutation of the Virgin Mary before the birth of Jesus Christ, or the *Gloria in Excelsis* the hymn of the angels—the earliest Christmas Carol: the word Carol is from the Italian *Carola*, a song of devotion, (*Ash*); or from *cantare*, to sing, and *rola*, an interjection of joy, (*Bourne*.)

Carols are yet sung at Christmas in Ireland and Wales; but, in Scotland, where no Church fasts have been kept since the days of John Knox, the custom is unknown. On the Continent it is almost universal: during the last days of Advent, Calabrian minstrels enter Rome, and are to be seen in every street, saluting the shrines of the Virgin-mother with their wild music. Within the present century, the singing of Carols began on Christmas Eve, and were continued late into the night. On Christmas Day, these Carols took the place of Psalms in all the churches, the whole congregation joining; and at the end the clerk declared in a loud voice, his wishes for a merry Christmas and a happy new year to all the

parishioners. Still these Carols differed materially from those of earlier times, which were festal chansons for enlivening the merriment of Christmas, and not songs of Scripture history; the change having been made by the Puritans.

The decking of churches and houses with laurel and other evergreens, at this period, may be to commemorate the victory gained over the powers of darkness by the coming of Christ. The gathering of Mistletoe is a relic of Druidic worship; and Holly was originally called the *holy tree*, from its being used in holy places.

CHRISTMAS DAY has been set apart, from time immemorial, for the commemoration of our Blessed Saviour's birth; when, "though Christ was humbled to a manger, the contempt of the place was took off by the glory of the attendance and ministrations of angels." Christmas is named from *Christi Missa*, the mass of Christ; it was, however, forbidden to be kept as a fast by the Council of Braga, A.D. 563; which anathematized such as did not duly honour the birthday of Christ, according to the flesh, but pretended to honour it by fasting on that day; a custom attributed to the same conception which led to the practice of fasting on the Lord's day: namely, the belief that Christ was not truly born in the nature of man. Since this Canon, we do not find any positive regulation specially affecting the observance of Christmas.—(*Feasts and Fasts*.)

To detail the hospitalities of Christmas would fill a volume, though our artist has grouped the most characteristic celebrities of the season. Here is "The Fine Old English Gentleman" welcoming to his gate a band of Mummings, (masked persons,) and Minstrels, with their ludicrous frolics, not forgetting the Hobby-horse Dance:—

We are come over the Mire and Moss: | A Dragon you shall see,
 We dance an Hobby-horse; | And a wild worm for to flee.

The *Loving-cup* was borrowed from the *Wassail-bowl*, though the latter was carried about with an image of Our Saviour. Here, too, is the *boar's head*, "the rarest dish in all the land, and provided in honour of the King of bliss." Nor must we omit the *Yule-log* burnt on Christmas Eve; though the bringing it in with "Christmas Candles" is forgotten. Even the mince-pies are assumed to be emblematical—their long shape imitating the cratch, rack, or manger wherein Christ was laid—(*Selden*). Christmas boxes are of Pagan origin.

Although much of this custom of profuse hospitality has passed away, Christmas is yet universally recognised as a season when every Christian should show his gratitude to the Almighty, for the inestimable benefits procured to us by the Nativity of our Blessed Saviour, by an ample display of good will toward our fellow men. "Hospitality is threefold: for one's family; this is of necessity: for strangers; this is of courtesy: for the poor; this is charity."—(*Fuller*.)

St. Stephen's Day, (December 26,) is first in the days of Martyrdom: St. Stephen being a Martyr both in *will* and *deed*. *St. John* (December 27,) being a Martyr in *will*, but not in *deed*, is placed second.

The Innocents, (December 28,) being Martyrs in *deed*, though not in *will*, are, therefore, placed last.—(*Elementa Liturgica*.)