



BY SIR WALTER BESANT.



THE first point to be observed, in speaking of London at any season of the year, is that, if feasting, merriment, music, and cheerfulness can by any excuse be connected with the time of year, the good people of London will take advantage of that excuse. Fortunately, there have always been plenty of excuses for holding high festival at Christmas. It was both a pagan festival and a Christian festival; it was the greatest festival of the year; the longest; the most joyful; the most natural. It stood at the end of one year and the beginning of the next; it was held in those halcyon days when—as they believed—all Nature was hushed and the kingfisher hatched her eggs in a nest that floated under a still sky upon still waters; the sun had reached his lowest and had already begun to return; the short days and the frosts forbade much work; the long and the cold nights made the people gather round the fire; the harvests of the year were gathered in, even to the latest October apple; and the season commemorated the event which, of all the Christian Year, appealed most strongly to the hearts of the people.

Again, in this time of frost and snow; of the sharp frost and the silent snow; of the short days and the long evenings; it was necessary that folk should keep up their hearts with feast and song. Think only what the depth of winter meant to our forefathers.

The working day, the day of daylight, was not eight hours long; the evening set in before four o'clock; in the narrow lanes of London, with the tall, gabled houses overhanging on either side, there was no brightness of sun and sky, but only twilight which lasted all the day; outside reigned Winter, cold and wet: the shops were closed, the stalls were cleared, the workshop fires were raked out, at sunset; there followed a long evening to be faced; the deserted streets were as black as the night; there were no books to read; there were no theatres; there were no amusements of any kind; for light, there was the fire on the hearth; what could they do to get through the long and weary evening but feast and drink, on days of festival, and gather in the halls of their Guild to dance and sing and dress up and play antics?

To dress up: to become mummers: to play antics: to act and pretend: the staple amusement was to do this or to see others doing it. That unfortunate sovereign, Edward the Second, used to beguile his journeys by laughing at his Tom Fool who fell off his horse every five minutes and pretended to break his bones. He was a king, however, and could afford to keep this kind of Christmas all the year. His subjects, less fortunate, had to become their own Tom Fools and to perform their own Tomfoolery for themselves; and, oh! only to think of the comic actors, the funny men, the men who could not speak without causing the whole audience to

hugh, that the generations in their following produced! They had their day and their fame and their reward, and they are long since forgotten. To every age its comic mime and its own sense of humour: we have ours and are, I hope, properly grateful therefor. We may be quite sure that the comic muse was encouraged as much when the Edwards ruled as when Victoria reigns.

The Christmas festivities, then, consisted, first, of the gathering together in house and hall: merely to feel one of a company is

and Psalms, the Nativity, and the arrival of the three kings from the East. This was one of the simple dramas by which the people who could not read learned the essentials of the Gospel history. In the same way they learned and realised the meaning of the Resurrection; of the Raising of Lazarus; of the doubts of Thomas; and so on.

In addition to this sacred drama, however, Christmas provided the entertainment of the Boy Bishop. Attempts have been made to



"THE BOY BISHOP AND HIS FOLLOWING RODE ABOUT THE STREETS OF LONDON IN STATE."

something; then, of feasting, with an attention to the wine cup which would, literally, stagger humanity of the present day; with minstrels playing continually; with singing—the people always had their songs in their own tongue, Saxon, Old English, Middle English, or whatever the scholars call it; with dancing; and with mumming—always with mumming, which included juggling and tumbling, and feats of skill and strength. A mediæval feast, after the dinner, on which I will presently enlarge with pleasure, very much resembled the performance at a modern music hall with its successive "turns" and its favourite performers.

The "making up" began in the Church. First, they prepared the manger and acted in dumb show, while the choir sang carols

show what the Church intended by this extraordinary custom: my own opinion is that the Church intended nothing; but that the people in the Church, whether reverend divines or irreverent deacons, just endeavoured to make the time one of topsyturvydom. The way was this. I take the custom at St. Paul's Cathedral to stand for all.

On the Day of St. Nicholas—December 6th—the children of the choir elected one of themselves to hold office as Bishop until Childermass or the Day of Holy Innocents, on December 28th. St. Nicholas, it may be remembered, was the admirable Saint who restored to life the three children who had been murdered and cut to pieces and put in pickle by the inn-keeper. You may see



CENTUM QUADRAGINTA.

pictures of the boys, restored to life and joined together, standing up in their tubs. Assistants or clerks to the Bishop were also chosen by the choristers. It must be borne in mind that, so far as the Church was concerned, everything was done in due order and without any burlesque. Only things must be topsy-turvy. The Boy Bishop was attired in pontificals duly preserved among the Vestments of the Church: he wore a white mitre adorned with flowers; he carried a pastoral staff, and he was dressed in such robes as belong to a Bishop. The Bishop's attendants wore copes and stoles like the Canons and Prebendaries. For three weeks the Boy Bishop and his following rode about the streets of London in state; the Dean found a horse for the Bishop; the Canons residentiary found horses for the clerks; they called at the houses of the merchants; they sang their carols; they were caressed and welcomed by the girls and

the mothers; the Bishop gave his benediction paternally; they received gifts and they made good cheer.

On the evening of St. John's Day—December 27th—after vespers, the Boy Bishop and his clerks, all duly arrayed, left their places in the choir, and with lighted tapers in their hands—would that I were an artist to paint this scene!—they walked in procession singing the words beginning "Centum Quadraginta," from Rev. xiv. 1, down the darkening Church to the Altar of the Blessed Trinity, which the Boy Bishop censed. Then they sang an anthem: this done, the Boy Bishop recited certain prayers commemorative of the Holy Innocents. Going back to the Choir, the boys took the stalls of the Canons, while these Reverend Fathers served in their place, humbly carrying candles, thurible, and book. The service finished, the Boy Bishop rose in his throne, and, holding the pastoral staff in his left hand, pronounced the Benediction, all kneeling. After this he made the sign of the Cross over the kneeling crowd, saying:—

Crucigno signo vos consigno; vestra sit tuitio.

Quos nos emit, et redemit, suæ carnis pretio.

The next day, that of the Holy Innocents, was the last day and the grand day of this brief elevation. On that day the Boy Bishop preached his sermon in the Cathedral. This sermon, a perfectly serious discourse, was written for him. Dean Colet ordered that the boys of St. Paul's should attend the sermon; he himself wrote at least one of the sermons; Erasmus wrote one; two others have been preserved and published. After the sermon followed a feast provided by the Dean, or one of the canons, for his two chaplains, his taper bearers, his clerks and two of the Church servants. Then my Lord Boy-Bishop, with tears, put off his mitre and his *pontificalia*, and went back to the Cathedral school and to the Choir—and oh! how flat, for many and many a day, did life become in thinking of the glories and the splendours of that brief Translation!

Once the boy died while he was still a

Bishop; they buried him with episcopal ceremonies, keeping up the topsy-turvydom even to the funeral service; and they erected a marble monument to his memory which you may see in Salisbury Cathedral. In the year 1542, Henry VIII. abolished the custom. Queen Mary revived it—and Queen Elizabeth finally abolished it. How far it was observed in the parish Churches I know not. In the inventory of vestments belonging to St. Peter's, Cheapside, there are copes and vestments for the "child"; which looks as if there was a Boy Bishop in that Church as well. I incline to think, however, that the parish churches of the City merely took part in the election and in the provision of copes and vestments, and that St. Paul's, in the matter of the Boy Bishop, acted for the whole city.

It has sometimes been objected, as against the dignity of Royalty, that Sovereigns and Princes have always been fond of looking on at a mumming of all kinds, and especially at merry making and tomfoolery. I have remarked on the deplorable example of Edward II. James I. was also accused of unseemly merriment when alone with jesters, buffoons, and comic persons. Those who object should consider the weakness of human nature. No man, not even one born to it, and trained for it, can endure the Royal Highness and the Gracious Majesty always. There must be moments of relaxation. Let His Majesty's moments of unbending be respected and remain unknown. Therefore we find a Fool always in attendance upon the King; you may be sure that he was not such a Fool as to intrude himself when he was not wanted. Therefore, also, we find a Lord of Misrule appointed every Christmas in the Court to conduct the festivities of the season. The Rule of the Misrule was that everything, save that which pertained to the dignity of the Sovereign and the great people of the Court, was to be turned topsy-turvy. The King kept open house: in the Norman days he wore his

Crown throughout the Christmas Feast; every day there were performances of minstrels and mummers; every day there was feasting for all; music for all; merriment for all. But since the dignity of the Court must be maintained in public, however much the Sovereign might unbend in private, the entertainment of the evening was always some kind of drama, taking, in the 16th and 17th centuries, the form of the Masque.

Bacon says of Masques, "These things are but toys—but yet, since princes will have such things it is better they should be graced with elegance than daubed with wit." He proved his taste by the attention he gave to the production of a Masque.

The Lord of Misrule at the Court of Queen Elizabeth during the last ten years of her reign was George Ferrers, one of the authors of the "Mirror for Magistrates." The Masque was a performance with set scenes of the most elaborate character, contrivances of trap doors and side scenes, for surprises and vanishing. The characters were dressed in



"MY LORD BOY BISHOP PUT OFF HIS MITRE."

the most sumptuous and elaborate apparel ; the parts were taken, not by the humble players, but by the courtiers themselves and even by members of the Royal Family ; the "book" was written by Ben Jonson, Beaumont, or by one of the recognised poets

a piece can be produced at the Lyceum or Her Majesty's. There were songs and dances set to music composed for the occasion ; the unravelling and following of the Allegory, which, it must be confessed, was generally tedious and sometimes trivial, occupied the

mind of the audience while the scenery and the dresses pleased their eyes. It was common to present the Heathen Deities on the stage ; Angels, Fairies, Spirits, Elves, Demons, with Muses and Graces came down hill-sides ; sprang up from the nether regions ; emerged from caves ; or floated down a river. Everybody recognised Diana or Venus, Minerva or Juno ; everybody knew a Dryad from a Naiad, and a Satyr from a Centaur ; everybody understood the Latin tags and verses which were curiously interjected : you will not find them in Ben Jonson, but they were put in by some of the actors.

If you will look at the map of London, say, about the end of the seventeenth century you will remark that between what we now call the West End, which was then gradually filling up, and the City, there is a broad belt occupied entirely by the lawyers. They had the Temple on the North, with Clements Inn, Lyon's Inn, New Inn, Serjeant's Inn, Clifford's Inn, Lincoln's Inn, Staple Inn, Barnard's Inn, Gray's Inn, and Furnival's Inn. They formed a quarter to themselves ; they were quite a separate class : I believe, but I have no proof, that a good many lawyers were the sons, grandsons, fathers and grandfathers of lawyers. However that may be, the lawyers lived in this quarter and they lived very much together and apart from the merchants on one side and their neighbours the great Lords on the other side. Now, when Christmas came the lawyers like the rest of the world unbent ;



"WHEN THE JUDGES AND BENCHERS AROSE AND DANCED ROUND THE GREAT FIRE."

of the time. The poem was allegorical or moral, generally the former. With its setting and its acting it was the actual forerunner of the play as we understand it. That is to say, while the Elizabethan dramas were acted in the yards of inns ; or on rough stages with hangings for scenery and not much expenditure in mounting or in dress, these pieces were staged and mounted in the best fashion possible for the time ; a Masque as performed before James I. and his Court would appear splendid even to those of us who know how

they elected their Lord of Misrule; this Prince reigned with splendour during the whole of the festive season; he was surrounded with the outward show of Royalty; he had his officers of State, his Lord Keeper; his Treasurer, his Guard of Honour, and two Chaplains who preached before him. As in the case of the Boy Bishop there is a curious blend of seriousness even in the midst of pretence. The first command of the Lord of Misrule was to lay aside all their wisdom and dignity—Judges, Masters, Benchers, King's Counsel, Serjeants, Readers, Barristers, all alike laid down their gravity and their wisdom and became, so to speak, boys again. The capacity of the age, in all classes, and at every time of life, for mirth and merriment and antics is to us truly wonderful. Prynne—the acidulated Prynne—says, mournfully, that this time was spent “in revelling, epicurisme, wantonnesse, idlenesse, dancing, drinking, stage plaies, masques, and carnal pomps and jollity.” True. Very true. And a most delightful time it was! Think only of the evening in Gray's Inn when the Judges and the Benchers arose and danced round the great fire under the Louvre in the middle of the Hall! This would be a delightful spectacle could it be repeated. And the Tudor dance was not a mere walk round, mind you! There were shakings of leg and cuttings of capers: there were sprightly turns and pointings of toes, with wreathed smiles on learned faces, not to speak of unwonted invitations of hand and inclining of body. “Carnal pomp and jollity,” indeed!

In the year 1561, there was kept a very noble Christmas at the Temple, the chief person, or Lord of Misrule, was Lord Robert Dudley, afterwards Earl of Leicester, who had with him four Masters of the Revels, a Master of the Game, and all the proper Officers of State, as Lord Chancellor, Lord Treasurer and so forth, duly dressed for their parts. What they did, with what state and ceremony they kept up the performance, is set forth at length in Nicholl's “Progresses of Queen Elizabeth.” I will take part of the ceremonies for St. Stephen's Day. After the first course of dinner had been served, the Constable Marshal, with the

“complete harness,” with drums and fifes before and Trumpeters following after, marched three times round the fire and then knelt before the Lord Chancellor and proffered their services. The Master of the Game, attired in green, and with him the Rangers of the Forest, next came in, with their attendants, and marched round the fire. They were followed by a Huntsman with a fox and a cat and nine or ten couples of hounds, and, amid the blowing of horns and the shouts of the company, the fox and the cat were chased in the Hall and killed by the hounds.

At the second course the Common Serjeant made a speech. Then “the ancientest” of the Masters of the Revels sang a song, followed by others. The evening closed with minstrelsy, mirth, and dancing. The entertainment, you will observe, consisted chiefly of make up and of acting. I should like to describe the great doings at Gray's Inn at the Christmas of 1594, when the Lord of Misrule performed the



“ THEN ‘THE ANCIENTEST’ OF THE MASTERS OF THE REVELS SANG A SONG.”



"THERE MUST BE MOMENTS OF RELAXATION" (p. 21).

"Gesta Grayorum." He was a Lord of many titles. "Prince of Purpoole" (Gray's Inn Lane was once Portpool or Purpool Lane), "Duke of Stapulia and Bernardia," Staple Inn and Barnard's Inn—"Duke of High and Nether Holborn," and so on, for five or six lines. Then was performed much lawyer-like, learned, and scholarly fooling, ending with dances—"thirty couples," we read, "danced the old measures and the galliards and other kinds of dances, revelling till it was very late."

They performed also burlesque ceremonies. Tenures of strange and wonderful character—I believe they had read Rabelais for the occasion—were recited; the Prince pronounced a General Pardon; he received Ambassadors; he heard mock petitions which satirised and exposed the weak places in the practice of the lawyers themselves; he instituted an Order of Knighthood, the rules of which are excellent fooling; he went in Procession through the City to dine with Sir John Spencer, Lord Mayor, at Crosby House; he received Letters of Advice from various parts of his dominions, even from distant Clerkenwell. He produced a Masque and

performed it before Her Majesty the Queen. The following is the last verse in that entertainment :

The hours of sleepy night decay apace;
And now warm beds are fitter than this place:
All time is long that is unwilling spent;
But hours are minutes when they yield content.
The gathered flowers we love that breathe sweet
scent,
But loathe them, their sweet odour being spent.
It is a life is never ill
To lie and sleep in roses still.

The full report of all the doings of this magnificent Lord of Misrule fill nearly one hundred pages of a goodly quarto. There are paradoxes; learned burlesques; songs and dances; dialogues; orations and parodies. But I must not linger over this incomparable Christmas Feast.

There was also a Lord of Misrule elected at Cambridge; but I have not by me any account of his doings; part of his duty, however, as *Præfectus Ludorum*, was the superintendence of the Latin plays performed by the students.

Let us pass eastward and visit the city.

Every house is decorated with green branches and sprigs of holm, ivy, bay, holly, and all the evergreens that grow. The craftsmen and the 'prentices go about asking for Christmas boxes. The children run from house to house singing carols in the morning; in every house the Yule Log is laid on the



"THE CHILDREN RUN FROM HOUSE TO HOUSE SINGING CAROLS."

fire; no house so poor that cannot afford some kind of Christmas fare.

As to the Christmas fare itself, we know pretty well what it was. In the houses of the better sort, the Boar's head was the principal dish: brawn and mustard always formed part of the feast. Among the rich people the great Christmas dish was the peacock. The bird was first killed and then skinned with the feathers adhering to the skin. He was then roasted and stuffed with spices and sweet herbs, and basted with yoke of egg; the skin and feathers were then put on him again and so, with the splendour of his displayed feathers, he sat royally in the dish, served with abundance of gravy. One would think that the gravy would spoil the feathers; one would ask how the bird within those feathers could be carved at all. One detail is pleasing: the peacock was brought in by the ladies of the house, preceded by maids carrying wax tapers, and was set before the principal guest. When the banquet was less splendid, the peacock, without the feathers, went into a pie. In addition to this noble bird, they served at Christmas pheasants "drenched with amber-grease"; and pies of carps' tongues. It was not, however, everybody who could afford peacocks and pies of carps' tongues. For them there were capons and geese—remark that no mention is made of beef and mutton at the mediæval feasts; they were meats too common for festivals and banquets. The Christmas dinner in most houses began with plum pottage or plum broth, which must not be confounded with plum porridge. It consisted of plain mutton or beef broth, thickened with brown bread, and enriched by the addition of raisins, currants, prunes, cloves, mace, and ginger. It seems as if it would be good. Mince pie or "shred" pie was also a necessary part of a Christmas feast.

Nor must one forget furmenty, a dish of wheat boiled in broth, and served with milk and the yoke of egg; nor plum porridge, which was the predecessor of the immortal plum pudding. Other pies there were: fish pie, goose pie, pigeon pie; and

there was the wonderful dish called Apple Florentine. You would like to try an Apple Florentine next Christmas? Pray do. If it were revived, it would probably become once more a national dish, popular especially with Temperance Societies. Take a large pewter dish; fill it with good baking apples; put in plenty of sugar and lemon; cover it with pastry. When it is baked, take off the cover,



"THE PEACOCK WAS BROUGHT IN BY THE LADIES OF THE HOUSE."

pour in a quart of well spiced ale, cover it up again, and serve.

As for drinks, they drank what they could afford and as much as they could afford, white wine, for choice, with sugar in the cup; or, indeed, red wine, for they were catholic in their love of the grape; or cider, or perry, or metheglin, but always returning or harking back to the national beverage, the good, strong ale that the Briton has always loved. And, indeed, can there be a finer drink than honest beer? Pepys says that after a feast at the New Year they ended the evening with ale and apples out of a wooden cup. There was great medicinal virtue in a wooden

cup; it was made of elm, box, maple, or holly; Pepys, however, does not tell us the material of his cup nor the properties it possessed. As for the apples, they were first baked and then dropped into the beer, to which they imparted a flavour delicate and a feeling festive. These customs, with certain modifications, continued almost to the present day. The Lord of Misrule vanished from the Court and the Inns of Court when the Puritans got the upper hand. When the King came back, the people had lost the power of mumming. Dignity was preserved even at Christmas. The Lord of Misrule appeared on the stage in the Christmas Pantomime introduced by Rich in 1713. The people—alas!—had lost, besides their old powers of merriment and mumming, the arts

of music and singing in which they had formerly so greatly excelled. Lute and theorbo and guitar were put away, and the madrigal and the four part song were no longer heard in the taverns, and the barbers' shops, and the private houses; but never, never, never, did the good folk of London forget how to feast and to drink. And, as a part of the Christmas feast—a sad degeneration of manners is indicated!—cards took the place of mumming, dancing, and singing. The game of Primero was followed by that of Maw; with both flourished the games of All Fours and Noddy; Ombre displaced Maw, and was itself displaced by Basset and by Quadrille. Finally, Whist alone remained the King of games for the elders, while for the frivolous there is offered Nap or Loo or Vingt-et-un.

Looking back upon the old festivities and the old mumming, I should like to have seen the Boy Bishop, in his white mitre, surrounded by his boy Canons, as innocent to look upon as the angels on the painted wall, blessing the people; I should like to have seen the judges and the serjeants and the Revellers holding up their petticoats and dancing round the central fireplace in Gray's Inn; I should like to have seen a City feast at Christmas in a Company's Hall; I should like to try a slice of that roast peacock, with a little of the stuffing; I should like to taste that dish called Apple Florentine; and I should like to have heard the children's carols, in the streets—oh! so very, very much better than our own performances—on the cold morning of Christmas Day.



"THEY ENDED THE EVENING WITH ALE AND APPLES OUT OF A WOODEN CUP."