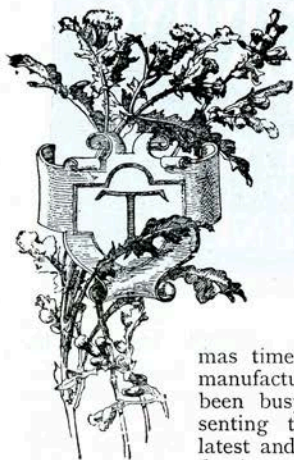


THE QUEEN'S CHRISTMAS.



HERE is no more happy home in all the realms over which our Queen reigns than that at Osborne at Christmas time. If loving thought and careful, earnest preparation can make happy hearts, the Queen secures this for all her children, grandchildren, and servants at Christmas time. For weeks before,

manufacturers of toys have been busy planning and presenting to Her Majesty the latest and most wonderful productions of Toyland. Tables have simply been littered with toys, jewels, costly furs, and the hundred and one things that people are wont to give to their friends at that happy season. Every present is selected by the Queen herself. As the toys are unpacked, she sees a marvellous horse that neighs and shakes its head; at once it is put aside with the words, "That will do for Edward." A doll's house, the dolls all dressed in furs, and the ground outside covered with snow, next comes to view; "That's just the thing for Olga," says the Queen. Thus every present is carefully selected, the wants of each one lovingly thought of, until not a servant in the whole of the royal household has been forgotten.

The Christmas programme begins on Christmas Eve. By this time the whole of the palace has been thoroughly decorated with holly, mistletoe, evergreens, and flowers. Waggon-loads of these have come from Windsor, and from the estate of Osborne. In the afternoon the school-children of St. Mildred's, Whippingham, which is the parish church—in fact, was built by Her Majesty—will come up to the palace for their treat. This is a great event, and has been looked forward to for many weeks. At this function the Queen is not present. This is Princess Ena's opportunity; she plays the lady of the house and receives the Queen's little guests with all the dignity of her position. It is true that Princess Beatrice and Princess Louise are present to see that all goes well, and they are assisted by the little cousins who may be staying for Christmas at Osborne.

Then presents of beef and pudding are given to the labourers on the estate, and Christmas doles to aged, sick, and disabled persons, recommended by the clergymen of the selected parishes. But the evening is the great time in the Queen's home. Then there are tremendous romps round the royal Christmas tree in the banqueting-hall. The tree is a fine young fir after the German custom, and it is loaded with all the presents,

and illuminated with myriads of coloured tapers. One need not describe the scene, for the hearts of royal princes and princesses are just the same as those of commoners. Little eyes sparkle, little feet dance, little hands clap, and little hearts are full of gladness; just like those we have seen in other rooms. No one is better pleased, no one is happier in all this festive group, than the Queen herself.

On the morning of Christmas Day, the Queen gives her grandchildren their presents, and they offer her their little gifts of their own handiwork, which have cost them no little thought and trouble. These presents the Queen prefers to any that can be bought at shops. Then there are letters to read, and cards to delight over, and the Queen enjoys the young people's pleasure quite as much as they do themselves.

The Queen, her family, and suite attend divine service at the Chapel Royal in the palace. This is simply decorated with holly and white chrysanthemums, arranged by the Princess Beatrice, her daughter, and the other young people at Osborne. One of the clergy of the Isle of Wight officiates. Christmas hymns are sung, and the same simple service is held as that in every other church throughout the land. Lunch takes place at one o'clock in the private dining-room. The baron of beef, woodcock-pie, and boar's head are much in evidence for those who like a cold lunch. In the afternoon the Queen drives out with one or two of her daughters, and leaves the young people to amuse themselves after their own fashion. Not a few of the latter mount their bicycles, and go for a scorch round the royal domain, making a laughing, racing troop of young people. The great event, however, is the Christmas dinner. For this all the children have a special dispensation to stay up, and those of us who can remember our own childhood's days can imagine the feeling of fun created by this extra dissipation. Dinner takes place in the banqueting-hall; the sideboard is loaded with plate—salvers, flagons, cups, goblets, beakers, and ewers—the accumulation of many reigns—all polished until they twinkle in the light. Very pretty is the effect of the red and green holly contrasting with the subdued Oriental colouring of the decorations. On the fire is a huge yule-log, a portion of the trunk of a young tree, crackling in the most Christmassy fashion. A band plays in the gallery; and when, the lights being lowered, the pudding is brought in, hissing and steaming with its lighted brandy, one can realise that the mirth has reached its height, and the children feel that Christmas is the very merriest and brightest time in all the happy year. After dinner is dessert of all kinds of fruit, walnuts, French bonbons, and German cakes, etc., just as in any ordinary house. After more games, tired heads and tired little bodies sleep and dream in Royal Osborne with the same feelings as in our simple homes.

God give our Queen and all her family a happy Christmas this 1898! So say we all of us.