

in Mayence have been highly praised. His last work, at which he was engaged a few hours before his death, was a statue of Luther.

PEEPS THROUGH LOOPHOLES AT MEN, MANNERS, AND CUSTOMS.

BY CUTHBERT BEDE.

"'Tis pleasant, through the loopholes of retreat,
To peep at such a world; to see the stir
Of the great Babel, and not feel the crowd."

COWPER.

NO. XII.—CHRISTMAS HERALDS.

It was on a Monday morning, in the last week of November, in the year 1787, that an elderly man of plain, decent appearance, came to the house called Weston Lodge, in the pleasant village of Weston-Underwood, in Buckinghamshire. The lodge was situated close by the road-side, and had been the vicarage house; and, though its present occupant was not a parson, he had done more parson's work than had been accomplished by most men who have not been admitted to holy orders; for he was William Cowper, the poet. A twelvemonth since he had come to that spot from the adjacent village of Olney, where he had lived for twenty years, and where, among many other religious productions, he had written those hymns which have been a comfort and consolation to Christians throughout the world.

Cowper lived there with his dear old friend, Mrs. Unwin,* with whom he had removed from Olney. His fifty-fifth birthday, on November 26, 1786, found him safely housed there, hardly attending to the dark, thick fog that hung around the house on account of the neatness and cosy comfort that reigned within doors. It was one of those days that were the heralds of Christmas, from which the poet of "The Task" knew how to extract so much that was pleasant and profitable; and, whether the days were wet or dry, the house was warm and comfortable.

"There is a man in the kitchen, sir, who desires to speak with you," said the person who acted as butler, footman, and gardener to the two inhabitants of Weston Lodge.

"What sort of a man is he, Sam?" asked his master.

* In the very interesting "Life of John Newton," by the Rev. Josiah Bull, grandson of Cowper's friend, the biographer settles conclusively the often mooted question of the poet's engagement to Mrs. Unwin. Mr. Bull quotes the following passage from Southey, and proves its error by an extract from "Newton's Diary," hitherto unpublished:—"Another cause, however, has been assigned for the return of Mr. Cowper's malady. It has been said that he proposed marriage to Mrs. Unwin; that the proposal was accepted and the time fixed; that prudential considerations were then thought to preponderate against it; and that his mind was overthrown by the anxieties consequent upon such an engagement. This I believe to be utterly unfounded; for that no such engagement was either known or suspected by Mr. Newton I am enabled to assert; and who can suppose that it would have been concealed from him?" This is unquestionably a mistake, although thus strongly put. Nothing, it is obvious, was more natural or becoming than a marriage between two persons thus providentially brought to reside with each other. Nor was there, as is perhaps generally supposed, any great disparity of years between Mr. Cowper and Mrs. Unwin. Now the editor of this volume is able to state that he has again and again heard his father say that Mr. Cowper and Mrs. Unwin were betrothed, and about to be married, when the melancholy return of Mr. Cowper's malady in 1773 prevented the accomplishment of their purpose; and, moreover, that it was Mrs. Unwin herself who made this statement to his grandfather. But what Mr. Newton has said in his unfinished sketch is even still more to the purpose, and must for ever settle this question. We copy from the original before us: "They were congenial spirits, united in the faith and hope of the gospel, and their intimate and growing friendship led them in the course of four or five years to an engagement for marriage, which was well known to me, and to most of their and my friends, and was to have taken place in a few months, but was prevented by the terrible malady which seized him about that time."

"A plain, decent, elderly man, sir, who gives his name as Cox, and says that he has trudged hither all the way from Northampton, desirous to speak with you."

"It must be a pressing matter that thus makes him undertake a walk of some fifteen miles. Show him in, Sam." And Sam presently returned, ushering the decent, elderly man into Cowper's study, which was also the dining-room.

"Pray be seated, sir," said Cowper, with his customary polite and gentle manner; "and let me know for what cause I am indebted for the honour of this visit, paid at the task of so long a walk."

"Sir," said the visitor, taking a seat, and clearing his throat, as though he were in his clerk's desk and about to commence his official duties—"sir, my name is Cox. I am clerk of the parish of All Saints, in Northampton; brother of Mr. Cox, the upholsterer. It is customary for the person in my office to annex to a bill of mortality, which he publishes at Christmas, a copy of verses. You will do me a great favour, sir, if you will supply me with one."

To this, Cowper replied, "Mr. Cox, you have several men of genius in your town; why have you not applied to some of them? There is a namesake of yours in particular, Cox the statuery, who, everybody knows, is a first-rate maker of verses. He, surely, is the man of all the world for your purpose."

"Alas, sir!" replied the Northampton parish clerk, "I have heretofore borrowed help from him; but he is a gentleman of so much reading that the people of our town cannot understand him."

Cowper could not but feel all the force of the compliment implied in this speech, and was almost ready to answer, "My good friend, they may find me unintelligible for the same reason." But, on asking him whether he had walked over to Weston on purpose to implore the assistance of his muse, and on the clerk's assuring him that he had done so, Cowper, as he afterwards testified to his cousin, Lady Hesketh, felt his mortified vanity a little consoled; and, pitying the poor man's distress, which appeared to be considerable, promised to supply him with what he wanted; and Mr. Cox took his leave, with many protestations of gratitude, and was shown out through the kitchen by Sam.

Cowper was not one to forget a promise, especially when it was to give gratuitous help to an inferior in rank and station. He soon wrote nine verses, one of which has made its mark and been often quoted:—

"Like crowded forest-trees we stand
And some are mark'd to fall;
The axe will smite at God's command,
And soon shall smite us all."

And though he headed his verses with a quotation from a Latin author—perhaps to show that he also was a gentleman of much reading, like Mr. Cox the statuery—yet he wound up his stanzas with lines that could be as easily understood by the people of Northampton as any preceding ones in his poem. They were these, and were presumed to be written by the brother of Mr. Cox the upholsterer:—

"So prays your clerk with all his heart,
And, ere he quits his pen,
Begs you for once to take his part
And answer all—Amen!"

This poem was sent off to Northampton by the waggon, which, as Cowper said, was "loaded in part with my effusions in the mortuary style." And he gaily exclaimed, "A fig for poets who write epitaphs upon individuals! I have written one that serves two hundred persons." He wrote five more of these poems to

accompany Mr. Cox's "bills of mortality" for the ensuing years, up to 1793; but in the following year, 1794, the breaking down of his own health prevented him from continuing his accustomed kindness to the parish clerk of All Saints.

Those "bills of mortality," with their copies of verses, were, at that time, among the looked-for heralds of Christmas; and others than parish-clerks were wont to announce the season by a distribution of "A Copy of Christmas Verses," presented to those inhabitants of the town from whom they anticipated the present of a Christmas-box. Postmen and dustmen have done this up to a very recent date; and the watchmen were strenuous upholders of the custom. One of their pieces, of the date 1823, concluded with the following lines:—

"To brighter scenes we now direct our view;
And first, fair ladies, let us turn to you.
May each New Year new joys, new pleasures bring,
And life for you be one delightful spring!
No summer's sun annoy with fev'rish rays,
No winter chill the evening of your days.
To you, kind sirs, we next our tribute pay:
May smiles and sunshine greet you on your way!
If married, calm and peaceful be your lives;
If single, may you forthwith get you wives!
Thus, whether male or female, old or young,
Or wed or single, be this burden sung:
Long may you live to hear, and we to call,
A happy Christmas and New Year to all!"

The heralds of Christmas are very numerous, and appear in very different shapes. We have only to glance down the advertising columns of the newspapers, any time after Advent has begun, to see in those manifold announcements of creature comforts, luxuries, and redundancies with which our nation of shopkeepers usher in the festive season, what are considered by them and their customers to be the heralds of Christmas. One advertiser is disposed to think that a guinea hamper of cheap wines will be found an acceptable herald; another changes the hamper of wine to a chest of tea; another to a load of coals; another to a box of toys for a Christmas-tree; another to a case of oranges, and raisins, and dried fruit, with "sugar and spice and all that's nice." Then there are the signs of preparation at the poulterers' and butchers', at the grocers' and fishmongers'; and the key-note sounded for the Christmas cheer by the Smithfield Club Cattle-show. There are also the "breakings-up" of school, and the beginning of the holidays, the sure and pleasant heralds of Christmas to all the "happy families" throughout the land. And there are also the waits, whose early minstrelsy is heard a week or two in advance of Christmas. But it is not of these Christmas heralds that I would speak, but of one or two lesser-known varieties, only to be met with in such sequestered country villages as our Minima Parva.

Yet, as I have just mentioned the waits, I will make an exception for an exceptional character, and briefly speak of one herald of Christmas, whose musical perambulations as "a wait" were confined to a manufacturing town. He has been dead now some sixteen years; but I well remember him through many years, and from an early age. I have forgotten his surname, but he always went by the name of "Blind William," for he was quite blind. Yet, notwithstanding that "total eclipse" of his vision, he would daily leave his home at Kidderminster, make his way unattended through two streets, turn up to the parish church (Richard Baxter's church), unlock the gates of the churchyard and tower, and climb the staircase to the belfry, where he rang the five o'clock morning bell, and then would return home, to revisit the church in the

evening, in order to ring the eight o'clock curfew bell. This bell on a certain night in the year was prolonged for one hour, a sum of money having been left for that purpose as a thank-offering to God, by a person who, on his way home from Bridgenorth fair, would have fallen over a rock, had not the sound of the Kidderminster curfew warned him to retrace his steps. Many times have I seen Blind William, with upturned sightless gaze and smiling face, steadily pursuing his solitary walk to and from his daily occupation. It was his sole business, except at Christmas; and he was the first herald of the season. Like many others similarly afflicted, he had an extraordinary ear and taste for music, and could quickly reproduce on his violin any tune that he had heard. On the midnight after Advent Sunday he began his annual task as a Christmas herald, by going through the streets, playing upon his violin a hymn tune, at the end of which he said, "I wish you a merry Christmas and a happy new year;" and then passed on to another street. This he continued nightly through the Advent weeks, and, in the Christmas week, came round for his well-earned Christmas-box. The female relative who kept house for him accompanied him on these visits, and on his nightly rounds as a Christmas "wait"; and often, as a boy, have I lain awake listening to Blind William's violin performance, and his cheery salutation. In the winter season he always carried a lantern when he went to and from the church; this was in order to prevent careless people, who were blessed with sight, from running against him. Blind William was the earliest herald of Christmas known to me in my youthful days.

But I would speak now of some heralds of Christmas to be met with in those thousands of sequestered villages and hamlets—like our Minima Parva—that are scattered broadcast over the fair soil of England. There are our mistletoe-gatherers; for that parasite grows so freely in this parish—in our orchards and on the American poplars and other trees in our hedgerows—that it becomes an important article of commerce; quite as much so as is our watercress, of which we send many tons' weight up to the London markets. We also send mistletoe and holly to the "great Babel"; and I dare say that we contributed our share to those remarkable statistics so elaborately made by Mr. Henry Mayhew, in 1851. He reckoned that there were, at that time, nearly 250,000 "branches" of holly sold by costermongers, for £738. The choicely-berried sprays for the crowning glory of the plum-pudding were valued at £200. The fear then expressed by a gardener as to a "No Popery" cry depreciating the demand for holly, may possibly affect its sale this present Christmas. "Why," he said, "properly to 'Christmas' St. Paul's would take £50 at least, or nearer £100. I hope there'll be no 'No Popery' nonsense against Christmasing this year. I'm always sorry when anything of that kind's afloat, because it's frequently a hindrance to business." Mr. Mayhew reckoned the London sale of mistletoe at £702. It was double the price of holly, which was often made to do duty for "the kissing-bush"; and half-a-crown was a not uncommon price for a handsome mistletoe bough. The greater portion of the "Christmas" is bought by the costers in the market to retail in the streets and suburbs of the metropolis; and their stock has to be laid in at least a fortnight before Christmas. Consequently it happens that here, in Minima Parva, as in other places, the holly and mistletoe is gathered when December has not half completed its days. Our "merry men" cannot afford, as did those in Sir Walter Scott's poem, to wait till Christmas-eve before they go to the

wood "to gather in the mistletoe"; for, when that evening comes, the mystic bough will have passed through many hands, and have travelled many miles. Its gathering gives profitable employment to many of our rural population, both young and old; and when I see two cottage lads pass up the lane with a stick over their shoulders, from which hang boughs of mistletoe and branches of berried holly, although they somewhat remind me of the pictures of Israelitish spies with the grapes of the Promised Land, yet I know them to be the heralds of Christmas, and therefore the harbingers of the season of glad tidings.

We have another Christmas herald in the shape of the country carol-seller, whose vocation begins with December. To our rural population he is just as much a harbinger of Christmas-tide as the may-bloom is of spring or the swallow of summer. The poet Gay said that the townspeople could "judge the festival of Christmas near" by rosemary and bays being "bawled in frequent cries through all the town"; and the country folks are reminded of the oncoming of the festal time by carols being bawled through the village streets. For the modern Autolycus who, in December, takes up the trade of a carol-seller, not only offers his wares for sale unto those who, like Mopsa, the shepherdess, dearly "love a ballad in print," but can also "bear his part" in singing it; " 'tis his occupation" so to do; and, like Autolycus, he often sets his carol "to a very doleful tune." Nevertheless it is music to the rustic ear; and the carol-seller is doubly welcome because he is also a carol-singer.

The country carol-seller disdains to offer novelties of song. He knows his customers, and is aware that they will give the preference to verses, the rudeness of whose jingles and the roughness of whose metre are all smoothed and mellowed to them by time and long familiar usage. And so he gives them their choice between such carols as "God rest you, merry gentlemen," "Behold the grace appears," "I saw three ships come sailing by," "Now thrice welcome Christmas, that brings us good cheer," "When Christ was born of Mary free," "Lullaby, my baby, what meanest thou to cry," "A glorious star from heaven appeared," "On Christmas night all Christians sing," or, of more recent origin, "While shepherds watched their flocks by night," "High let us swell our tuneful notes," and "Hark, the herald angels sing." All these are sealed either with the stamp of antiquity or of public approval, at any rate in rural districts; and the country carol-seller selects his wares judiciously, and confidently offers to the rustic ploughman the Christmas carol that he would not place before a town mechanic. The cuts also must be old-fashioned. Hone once advised a printer to get some new designs, and the answer was, that the people wouldn't think the carols genuine if the pictures were modern. So we leave him singing to his small audience of village children—

"The shepherds at those tidings
Rejoiced much in mind;
They left their flocks a-feeding,
In tempest, storm, and wind,
And went to Bethlehem straightway,
The heavenly Babe to find."
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The end of the year has now brought my monthly essays to a close, and I have thought that I could not more appropriately conclude them than by taking my last "Peep through Loopholes" at those Christmas heralds who proclaim the approach of the glad season that brought Peace on Earth, Good-will to Man.

TRIPLE RAINBOWS.

To the Editor of the LEISURE HOUR.

SIR,—I enclose a copy of a very short paper by Bishop Mant, descriptive of the phenomenon of triple rainbows, described and illustrated in No. 826 of the LEISURE HOUR, my reason being that it supplies the explanation "left open for the consideration of meteorologists."

The bishop's paper is accompanied by a coloured engraving of the three bows, their position being very similar to that you have reproduced from the "Encyclopædia Metropolitana," as seen by Dr. Halley at Chester. It is worthy of notice that the point on which the bishop evidently felt doubt, namely, that the relative position of the three bows remained unchanged, had on the previous occasion been noted by Halley, thus supplying the missing link in the verification of the bishop's explanation. Your readers will notice that there is the requisite water surface in each case. "In the North Seas" there would probably be more or less, "at Belfast" there is the Lough, "at Chester" the estuary of the Dee, and lastly, "amid the isles of Greece" there could be no scarcity of water, and the mirror was evidently good, as "the yacht was becalmed and perfectly steady." From all the evidence there cannot be a doubt that the extraordinary bow described by your correspondent, was occasioned by an image of the sun reflected from the surface of water. I may add that Dr. Scoresby (in "Edinburgh New Philosophical Journal," vol. II. p. 235) described some appearances of this kind, observed in the North Seas, but these were much more imperfect than that described by Bishop Mant. G. J. SYMONS.

From the Transactions of the Royal Irish Academy, Vol. XV., 1828. A PHENOMENON OF THE RAINBOW, OBSERVED BY R. MANT, D.D., M.R.I.A., LORD BISHOP OF DOWN AND CONNOR, NOV. 14TH, 1826.

"This phenomenon was observed at the See House, near Belfast, between 3 and 4 p.m. on Tuesday, November 14, 1826. It remained till the setting of the sun. The colours of each bow were brilliant, but the centre one was the least so. It is not known how long it was visible, but it must have been at least ten minutes. This phenomenon appears to afford an interesting illustration of the theory of the rainbow.

"It cannot be doubted that the extraordinary, or centre bow, was occasioned by an image of the sun reflected from the surface of water (probably the Lough of Belfast). The description and figure answer exactly to this explanation. The inner and centre bow have their colours in the same order. They both appear to spring from the same points of the horizon, as they ought; because the sum of the heights of the two bows must be equal to twice the angle of the primary bow. The centre bow appears to mix itself with the exterior, or secondary bow. This circumstance enables us to point out with tolerable exactness when the observation, as represented in the drawing, was made. The interval between the primary and secondary bow being somewhat above 8°, the sun's altitude must have been about 4°. Now, on November 14, in lat. 54° 36', this took place about thirty-five minutes past three o'clock. It is said it lasted at least ten minutes and till sunset. Probably what was supposed to be the setting of the sun was occasioned by its disappearing behind a low cloud. As the phenomenon does not appear to have been observed more than ten minutes, no material alteration would have taken place in the relative positions of the two primary bows."