

Christmas in Old Germany.

BY CONSTANCE HILL.



HOW cold and dark the night was! It seemed as if our tardy train would never reach its destination. The engine had broken down on the way, and we had been delayed for more than an hour. Darkness had set in early this 22nd December, and for

long past the only objects to be distinguished from our carriage windows were the few glimmering lights which marked some cottage or lonely farmhouse. But at last the lights begin to increase in number.

Surely we must be approaching a town. "Can this be Nuremberg?" we ask a fellow traveller. She answers, "Yes," and in another minute we are almost blinded by the glaring lights of a station, and are climbing down from our high carriage on to the platform to be welcomed by kind friends. A drive through streets full of wonderful mysteries to be revealed by daylight, lands us at our inn, and, whilst we enjoy our cozy supper and happy talk, we hear the solemn tones of the curfew bell resounding from the towers of the Lutheran Cathedral hard by. It is not a dream, we are really in Old Germany, and Christmas is before us!

The light of morning shows us that we are in a narrow street, whose houses have high pitched roofs of dark red tiles, in which are rows of small dormer windows mounting one above another. Pigeons strut upon the roofs or hover round the great chimney stacks, and far below the heavy country carts rumble slowly along.

It is a clear frosty morning, with bright

sunshine. We are soon taking our first stroll in the grand old town. We turn into the open Platz by the St. Lorenz Kirche, where an unexpected sight awaits us. A grove of fir trees rises beneath the solemn grey walls of the Cathedral, a forest brought into the heart of the city; but, unlike the Birnam wood that came to Dunsinane, this is a sign of "peace and good will" to all; for these are Christmas trees, and each tree, in its turn, will soon be the centre of happy home gatherings. They are being sold by peasants who have cut them on the wooded hill-sides, and who are now finding eager purchasers from all classes of the community, for to the

simple German, Christmas would be no Christmas if he had not his angel-decked tree for its symbol. All is bustle and movement, and merry voices ring through the keen air. The shadow of the great Cathedral falls across this busy scene; but beyond the shadow there is sunshine on the green tree-tops, and again there is sunshine far above our heads on the lofty spires of the Minster.

The scene is typical; for the shadow of mediæval gloom and oppression seems ever to interlace itself with the cheerful modern life of the town.

The grim stronghold has become a centre of thriving and peaceful industry; but the heavy iron gratings that protect the lower windows of the old houses speak of warlike times and suggest sudden alarms. The past is always near to us in Nuremberg, and in some points is even unchanged. The strange long waggons with open-railed sides that go lumbering by are the same that Albrecht Dürer looked upon, and the horses are the horses of his pictures. They have the same



THE BIRDS CHRISTMAS TREE.
A common sight in Germany.

strong bodies, small heads, and long silky manes and tails, and their harness with the high-peaked collars and shining brass ornaments is the harness of his day. The dray-horses, too, still wear the heavy brass muzzles of mediæval times.

As we leave the open Platz we notice a milk-cart harnessed to a man and a dog. It seems an odd combination, but one which is common here. We cross the river by the "Fleisch brücke," a single-arched bridge, and linger upon its summit to look at the quaint houses with their projecting wooden balconies that flank the little Pegnitz, where bridge beyond bridge appears and many a tower overtops the red roofs. As we descend from the bridge, the great market-place opens before us. In the centre appears a whole village of booths and stalls for the Christmas fair. The place swarms with country people, and a great hum of voices rises up from the crowd. The stalls are gay with colour. Here are piles of oranges and apples, and there red cabbages are conspicuous amid their green surroundings. There again, the ground is covered with the rough green and yellow pottery of the country. At the further side of the market-place rises the Fraüen Kirche, the Roman Catholic Church, with its beautiful iron gates, and



CONSIDERING HOW BEST TO LAY OUT THE COPPER COINS CLASPED IN THEIR SMALL FISTS.

opposite to it the "Schöne Brunnen" lifts its delicate pinnacle, a

"Fountain wrought with richest sculpture,
Standing in the common mart."

Carts are being loaded or unloaded, and whilst the work proceeds the horses eat their corn out of large wooden troughs slung from the end of the cart pole. Here is a country waggon which has been emptied of its burden and is now being loaded with the cheap toys of Nuremberg. Many of the women have large baskets strapped to their backs. One passes us with her basket full of red and blue paper flowers, and she is carrying toy carts and drums in her hands. Presently a long-bodied yellow and black vehicle emerges from the dark shadow of a side street. It is the post waggon, laden with its Christmas burden. The driver, in his glazed hat, sits aloft, with a sort of coupée behind him for passengers.

Evening finds us again in the market-place. How changed is the scene! The short winter's day is over and darkness hangs overhead, but the stalls are ablaze with lights. We work our way slowly amid a moving throng, down the narrow avenues of booths, whose counters are gay with every colour



GROVE OF FIR TREES BENEATH THE SOLEMN GREY WALLS.

imaginable, and gorgeous in sparkling tinsel. Here the gilt angels for the Christmas trees rise tier above tier "in shining row." They are made by the peasants upon a time-honoured pattern. The original Dutch wooden doll is provided with golden wings and glittering garments, all made of the paper of old school copy-books, duly gilt and embellished. There are piles of sugar plums, red, yellow, green and blue, and cakes ornamented with sugar-flowers. Here again is a toy stall brave with trumpets and drums and tin soldiers. That little boy and girl who are standing before the counter considering how best to lay out the copper coins clasped in their small fists, look as if they were attired in the clothes of their grand-parents. The boy wears a fustian suit like a farmer's, and the girl, a close-fitting white cap and a dark full skirt which falls to her ankles. There is a purchaser of a different kind: a sedate middle-aged man is choosing a long tinsel garland, which he holds in his hands and contemplates with as much gravity as if its purchase were an affair of state. When we return to the same spot a quarter of an hour later the matter is still under consideration. The fair, with its blazing lights, its busy traffic and its moving crowd, comes to a sudden end on Christmas Eve. When the great bell of the cathedral tolls the hour of six, its lights are put out, the booths are closed, the crowd disperses and silence reigns in the market-place. The festival of Christmas has begun.

Now is the time for family gatherings to commence. The trees have been decked as only Germans can deck them, and in every house of both rich and poor their tiny candles

are shedding forth rays of light and joy. The trees will not be dismantled and discarded after one illumination as in England, but will be relit for further happy gatherings, which will continue till the feast of Epiphany arrives. "We are going to light up on such an evening" is the message sent from house to house, to call friends together.



THE CHILDREN ARE THE FIRST TO RECEIVE THEIR GIFTS.

Though strangers in the land we are now to have our experience of its Christmas merry-makings. The first of these is given on Christmas Eve by the master and mistress of our hotel, the excellent Herr and Frau S., who have been long known and respected by the friends with whom we are staying. We are invited to join their family party at eight o'clock, and are soon introduced to three generations of relatives, from old "Onkl

Alphonse," the head of the family and the general favourite, to the little three-year-old Hermann, the only son of the house. We receive low bows worthy of a Sir Charles Grandison, and endeavour to return them by the stately curtsy which is indispensable in all German society. From the parlour we are conducted to the "Weihnacht Stube," where a huge Christmas tree reaching up to the ceiling is sparkling with lights and glittering ornaments, and where presents of all sorts are arranged upon tables round the room. The children are the first to receive their gifts, and soon little Hermann is driving triumphantly through the crowd of visitors in his new cart; the magnificent prancing steed which draws him being assisted in his progress by the two little sisters pushing vigorously behind. Then grandparents, aunts, uncles, cousins, and friends are all heard exclaiming over their presents with many an "Ach, Himmel, wie schön!" The English ladies are not forgotten. We receive large packets of the curious Nuremberg cakes.

Whilst we are examining these the door opens and the servants of the establishment file in, forming a procession, thirty-six strong, of waiters, porters, chambermaids, and white-coated cooks, who all receive gifts, accompanied by kindly greetings from their master and mistress.

Now the scene changes to the great dining-hall, where supper is laid and where the long table is adorned with miniature Christmas trees. "Onkle Alphonse" takes the head of the table, and one of our party is placed next to him. We produce the best German we can and endeavour to make ourselves agreeable. A younger brother of our host speaks English fairly well, but his efforts receive many a satirical criticism from a wit on the other side of the table. The critic, it must be observed, does not venture to speak a word of

English himself. Suddenly there is an exclamation of "Ach, der Vetter!" and a young student, with fair hair and spectacles on nose, appears in our midst. He has just arrived from the north of Germany, having made all haste to reach Nuremberg in time for the family gathering. He is welcomed with joy by all. Fun and laughter continue through the whole meal, but the climax of merriment is reached when the waiters bear in a snow man with a hat on his head and a pipe in his mouth, which turns out to be an ice pudding.

There is one person who has had no merriment this Christmas Eve. This is "our tailor," as we call him. We have often watched him and his family through the two small square windows of their single room, just beneath the eaves of a steep tiled roof opposite our bedroom windows. There we have seen him seated on a table at work early and late. This Christmas Eve he is stitching away later than ever. But behold! when the grey dawn of Christmas Day breaks, one of our party happens to peep out of her window, and there at six in the morning is a



THE BRIDE AND BRIDEGROOM STOOD UNDER A CANOPY BEFORE THE RABBI.

tiny Christmas tree shining bravely in the tailor's window, and father, mother and baby-boy are all enjoying their little festival, and have duly observed the German custom of lighting up the tree before the early church service on Christmas morning.

A little later the bells are clanging joyfully, and by nine o'clock people are flocking to church. We are soon entering the great Lorenz Kirche by the northern door. We pass round the western end and beneath the great rose-window. Here are the seats of the Meister-singers, and there is the very chair of black oak once occupied by Hans Sachs, "the cobbler poet laureate of the gentle craft." We take our seats on a bench midway up the nave and in front of the pulpit.

The building is vast and lofty and its general colouring is of sombre grey. But the grey is relieved by the rich colours of the old windows in the choir, through which the light is streaming.

Service begins. The minister, in his black gown, ascends the stairs of the pulpit. He pronounces a short prayer whilst we all stand, and then a grand chorale bursts forth from the whole congregation. How simple and child-like are the words, and how heart-stirring the music! There is one drawback, however, to our enjoyment of the service—the church is intensely cold. No attempt is made to warm it, and the great doors that open continually to admit the congregation have no inner vestibule or baize-covered passage as with us, but as they open, display the wintry sky and admit the wintry wind.

Festivities of all kinds mark the season of Christmas in Germany. It is a favourite time for weddings, Jewish as well as Christian. "There is to be a wedding from that house to-day," our friends often exclaim, and point out the tiny parterre of cut evergreens and flowers in front of a street door, which is prepared for the bride to walk upon. The edging of this floral carpet is always of box leaves, box being with the Germans a symbol of conjugal prosperity.

One day we found this pretty decoration before the door of our hotel, and learnt that a Jewish wedding was about to take place in its large assembly rooms. We were allowed to witness the ceremony, which took place between giant Christmas trees. The singing to Hebrew words of a hidden choir was very beautiful. The guests stood in two rows of males and females, as if preparing for a country dance. They wore evening dress, with the addition, in the case of the gentlemen, of their tall hats.

The bride and bridegroom stood under a canopy before the Rabbi, who ended his address with "Peace be to you in your family, peace be to you in your hearts, peace be to you in your home." The next day we witnessed a Lutheran wedding in the Cathedral. The minister concluded with the old Hebrew blessing, so that in both cases the last words were a prayer for peace and blessing.

Various social gatherings now follow night

after night, for which our spacious assembly rooms are a favourite resort. Our landlady invites us to view these festivities from an ante-chamber, which is raised above the level of the assembly rooms, and divided from them by a long counter, which serves as a bar or buttery-hatch. This place forms, in effect, an admirable private box for us sightseers.

The last entertainment we witness is given by the "Hunters' Club," which is largely composed of military men. In most cases the expense of hiring the rooms and of attendance was met by means of a small lottery or raffle. In the case of the "Hunters' Club" an amusing sale by auction of Christmas presents takes the place of the lottery, one of the officers acting auctioneer with great spirit. We hear peals of laughter from the gay crowd in front of the giant Christmas trees where he stands. Every article which he knocks down is carried to the possessor by three young ladies dressed in postilion fashion, with blue jackets, white waistcoats and skirts, shining black hats and top-boots, a silver horn at the side and a whip in the hand. When the dance begins, they crack their whips to mark time to the music with great effect!

So the Christmas week flits by and New Year's Eve arrives. It is a clear cold night, with the stars shining brightly overhead. There is an unusual bustle in our quiet street at this late hour. Windows are thrown open and heads are stretched out. There are the tailor and his wife at their window, like the rest, and we are stationed at ours. In the street below we see people running out of their houses and greeting one another. As twelve o'clock approaches there is a hushed silence for a few minutes, then comes the solemn striking of the hour, then the clanging of the deep-toned bells, and then one shout from all to all, "Prosit neu Jahr!" "Hail to the New Year!" "Happiness in the New Year!" And then bursts forth the strains of the old German hymn, "Now praise we all our God."

And so ends our Christmas in Old Germany—a Christmas full of kindly feelings and of "good will towards men," and one that we shall dwell on with pleasure for many a year to come.



A LADY DRESSED IN POSTILION FASHION.