



## CHRISTMAS IN THE OLDEN TIME.

BY HENRY J. VERNON.



**C**H RISTMAS is much more generally observed, in the United States, than it was a generation ago, and its observance is annually extending. But it is not kept, even yet, with anything like the universality, much less the enthusiasm, of the olden time in England.

Three hundred years ago, Christmas was, emphatically, the great festival of the year. It was the one that appealed, more eloquently than any other, to that feeling of a common brotherhood in man, which is the very essence of true Christianity. On Christmas day, rich and poor were drawn together, as they were at no other time. The mendicant was sure of his alms, no matter at what gate he knocked. The lord of the Manor saw that every one, who took his hire, had a joint for dinner. In the houses of the wealthy, relatives of every degree met, as they meet now at Thanksgiving in New England: the son from across the sea, the married daughter from another county, the widow, the orphan, the heir, the repentant prodigal. The chimneys blazed, the boards groaned, the minstrels piped. The young danced the long evenings through. The aged looked on, thought of the past, and

smiled. While many a bashful lover, who had sighed in vain all the year, took courage, when he caught his sweetheart under the evergreen, and availing himself of the old-time license, kissed her, and found tongue to speak.

But that which hallowed Christmas, especially, was the sacred memory connected with it. The story of the Babe in the manger was a story that melted the hardest hearts to love and reverence. It was kept vividly before the mind, on every recurring Christmas season, by the words of Holy Writ, by poetry, by legend, by pictorial representations even. The lowly stable, the Wise Men offering gifts, the actual Star in the East were real to the men of that day, in a sense that can hardly be understood in this material age. The times were, essentially, imaginative. People saw the steps of fairies in the rings of blighted grass. The devout believed, as Milton believed long after, in spiritual presences all about them. What wonder, therefore, that, in the quiet, starlit night, the carol-singers, wandering homeward, almost fancied they heard, in the sough of the wind among the trees, the rush of angels' wings, as the celestial messengers chanted, far up, and out of sight, "Glory to God in the Highest!"

"With folded hands, in stoles of white,  
On sleeping wings they sail."

For Christmas was ushered in invariably by carol-singers. The custom has now disappeared, almost entirely, even in England. Here we only know it, as practised in the domestic circle, when a mother, or elder sister, gathers the little ones around her, and sings carols with them. But as evening drew on, in the old times of which we write, the picked singers of the vicinage, both men and women, came together, and going from house to house, sang carols until long after midnight. Many of these carols are still extant, the oldest being a Norman one of the thirteenth century, of which we give the first stanza:

"Lordings, listen to our lay—



We have come from far away,  
 To seek Christmas.  
 In this mansion we are told  
 He his yearly feast doth hold:  
 'Tis to-day:  
 May joy come from God above,  
 To all those who Christmas love."

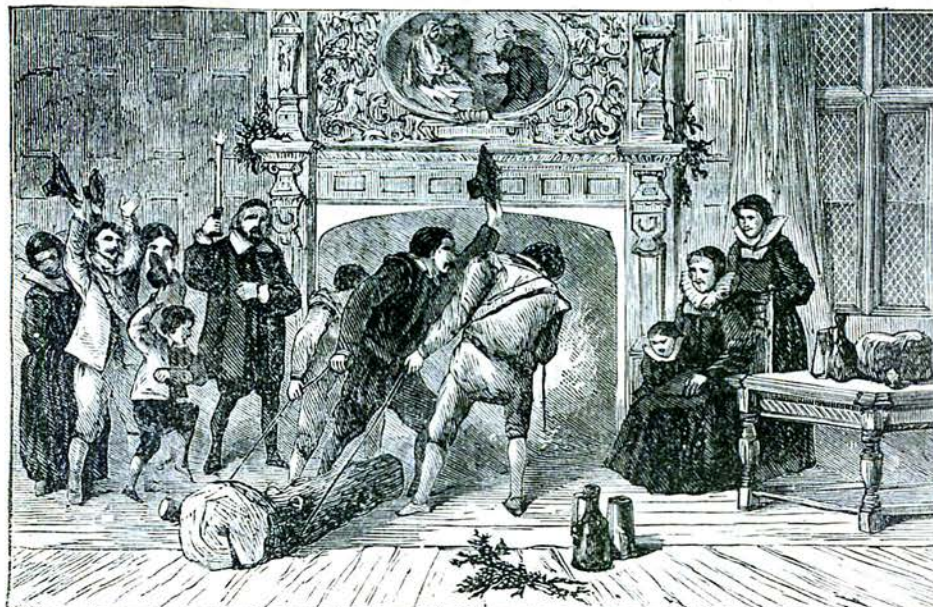
Sometimes the music was wholly vocal; sometimes a viol only accompanied the voices; some-

times there were musical instruments of every variety then known. But the carol, in the main, depended for its success, on the voice; and wisely, for vocal music was as universally cultivated, in England then, as in Germany now. This carol-singing was a beautiful custom, and might be revived to advantage, if not abused. Fancy the long prolonged notes, rising and falling, melodiously, on the night-air, and dying away, at last, in the distance, as if seraphic choirs echoed them from heaven. As Milton, in his "Hymn to the Nativity," rapturously exclaims;

"Such music (as 'tis said)  
 Before was never made,  
 But when of old the sons of Morning sung,  
 While the Creator great  
 His constellations set,  
 And the well-balanced world on hinges hung."

While the carol-singers were thus going from house to house, the Yule log, at the Manor House, was being brought in. Those were the days of capacious chimneys, and fire-places, wide enough to roast an ox. For this ceremonial, the butt of some huge tree was selected; for it was expected to act as back-log the week out; and it was dragged in by ropes, the whole household attending, with shouts, and often with music. The master, or mistress, sat by the hearth, looking on. When the mighty piece of timber was fairly in its place, and the lesser logs snapping and burning, musically, in front, the servants were sent back to the kitchen, where they kept Christmas Eve with song and dance, while the heads of the family, gathering around the blaze, with their children, and grandchildren, and other near relatives, "held high festival."

But if bringing in the Yule log was indispensable on Christmas eve, not less was the going to



church, for morning service, on Christmas day. Every one, high or low, was expected to be present. Woe to him or her, Goodman Hodge, or Goody Joan, who failed to appear. If not provided with an excellent excuse, scant was the dole that would be his, or hers, when Christmas came around again. The church, for this festive day, was decked out with holly, ivy, bay, and other evergreens. The lord of the Manor was there, prominent in his pew; the rest of the congregation had suitable, but ruder, seats.

Church over, everybody went home: in the earlier times to a late breakfast, afterwards to dinner. The dinner was the dinner of the year. Every one was happy, or tried to be so. All yielded to the genial spirit of the season. Smiles

were on the faces of rich and poor alike. It was under the influence of these festivities, that old George Withers broke out into his famous verses:

“So now has come our joyf’lest feast,  
Let every man be jolly.  
Each room with ivy leaves is drest,  
And ev’ry post with holly.  
Though some churls at our mirth repine,  
Round your foreheads garlands twine,  
And let us all be merry.

Now all our neighbors’ chimneys smoke,  
And Christmas blocks are burning;  
Their ovens, they with baked meats choke,  
And all their spits are turning.  
Without the door let sorrow lie  
And if for cold it hap’ to die,  
We’ll bury it in a Christmas pie,  
And evermore be merry.”



In the houses of the nobles, the greatest state was observed; and the principal feature of the festival was the bringing in the boar’s head. No Christmas dinner there, was considered complete without this famous dish. The preparation and adorning of the boar’s head tasked the head-cook’s utmost skill; each *chef* tried to outdo his rival, each strove to excel his former triumphs. It was an age when spices were used, in preparing food, to an extent utterly unknown now. Almost the only dish that has descended, unimpaired, from those times, is the Christmas mince-pie. What it is to other pies, all dishes, at that period, were to modern dishes. The boar’s head was a marvel of spices, and was served up decked with holly, and with

an apple in its mouth. A servitor of distinction, attired in his best, and preceded by heralds blowing trumpets, the jester leading all, carried in the dish; while minstrels, in a gallery overlooking the apartment, played on the viol, harp, and other instruments.

One of our illustrations depicts such a scene. The apartment is not unlike the banquet room, in Haddon Hall, where such revels were held for generation after generation. The old place is deserted now and desolate. The knights who fought at Crecy and Agincourt, and who kept their Christmas at Haddon afterwards, have been in their graves for centuries. No longer are there feastings in kitchen or solar; gay laughter is heard no more beneath holly and ivy; the long



gallery echoes not to the feet of dancers. But we have been there, when, in the fading twilight, everything assumed a shape so shadowy, that, for a moment, the antique rooms seemed to be peopled again, and we almost fancied we could hear the light step of Dorothy Vernon, as she lifted the tapestry, and stole out of the little postern door, to elope with her forest lover, who was of the Manners family, since Dukes of Rutland, a "squire," as she found afterwards, of "high degree," in disguise.

At this dinner each one had a place in keeping with his rank; for distinction of caste was, in those days, scrupulously observed. The head of

the household sat at the upper end of the board, often on a raised platform called a *dais*; while inferiors were placed at the lower end, and below the salt. A Lord of Misrule, chosen annually for the twelve days of the Christmas festivities, was always present, with his assistants, and they jested, mimicked, cut antics, and often danced the famous Dance of Fools. Practical jokes were greeted with roars of laughter. The food, like the fun, was rather coarse. Beef, mutton, boar's meat, and wild fowl were the dishes. It was a jovial, merry age, but not a refined one. Yet never, since, has any people, perhaps, so heartily

KEPT CHRISTMAS.

