

## Christmas-tide

By Mrs. Burton Kingsland

That many of our festival customs are survivals of those connected with the classic superstitions all the world knows. The earlier teachers of Christianity, finding that certain celebrations and forms of rejoicing had taken deep root in the constitution of society and the feelings of the people, endeavored to purify and adapt them to the uses of the Christian world. Most conspicuous among these was the festival of the Nativity.

The celebration of "the return of the sun," which at the winter solstice began gradually to regain its power, was observed with rejoicings in many lands.

The Roman Saturnalia fell at about this time, and was honored by curious privileges and celebrated with universal mirth and unbounded license. The wild revelry of the Saturnalia was supposed to have reference to the happy state of freedom and equality of the golden age of Saturn, whenever that chimerical era existed.

In northern Europe a celebration in honor of the god Thor was held at this season, and called "Yule" or "Iol," which name our Saxon ancestors retained, and made "Yule-tide" synonymous with Christmas.

Scott tells of the savage Dane who, "at Iol, in the low-ceiled hall" decorated with shields and axes, feasted his pirate crew upon the half-dressed steer, while the scalds yelled in praise of the joys of fighting, and the meeting ended in a wild dance.

The formal institution of Christmas began in the second century, though the event was doubtless commemorated among the earliest Christians.

Bishop Liberius preached the first Christmas sermon at Rome in 342. In England, with the introduction of Christianity, the Nativity was celebrated with yearly increasing splendor by its kings in a spirit of joyous festivity, and the example of the court was followed by the petty barons, whose revelries were in turn imitated by the people at large. "The light of a common festival shone upon palace and cottage." Once a year the poor had their glimpse of plenty, and every household gathered about its Yule-log, hung its bit of mistletoe over the door, and passed the wassail-bowl around its board. Immediately after the church services of the day the country gentleman of old stood at his own gate and distributed alms to the aged and destitute, and his tenants and retainers were feasted in the great hall with the good things of the season. The sports and festivities were under the protection of the lord of the soil, and all his dependents had a claim upon his hospitality. The celebration lasted twelve days—the time supposed to have been consumed in the journey of the three Wise Men to Bethlehem. Amusement was brought within reach of the people, and the laboring classes were granted unusual privileges by enactment, and even encouraged to enjoy themselves in ways generally prohibited to their class by the guardians of order. Even in the midst of the horrors of war Christmas mercies were not forgotten. During the siege of Rouen by Henry V., that city being in great extremities from hunger, the king ceased from hostilities on Christmas Day and gave food to his famishing enemies.

In 1625 there was an order of Parliament prohibiting the observance of Christmas Day, and in 1644 it was decreed that the day should be kept as a fast. The Puritans thought that temporal rejoicing threatened to take the place of spiritual thanksgiving; but, as a recent writer says, "When the Church refused to use her pleasant nets, Satan stole them and made them snares." Christmas merriment offered the golden mean between asceticism on the one hand and license on the other, and "Father Christmas was let in by the back door"—as the saying was at the time—to many a fireside.

There are many curious pictures of ancient manners preserved for us in connection with Christmas observances. A common sight was old "Father Christmas riding a goat and accompanied by a rollicking train, who would visit in turn the houses of peer and peasant and there hold noisy court"—an ancient form of the "surprise party."

An entertainment that shows the rudeness of the times of the "good Queen Bess" was a fox-hunt indoors. "A huntsman came into the hall with a fox and a cat, both tied to the end of a staff, and with them as many as twenty hounds. The animals were then loosed, and the fox and cat were set upon by the hounds and soon dispatched. After which the guests betook themselves to table."

The Master of the Revels was a Court officer who planned the entertainments of royalty, and it was doubtless to the genius (?) of such a functionary that the scene just described was due; but, later, every large gathering would choose among its own members a Master of the Revels, Lord of Misrule, or Abbot of Unreason, as he was variously called. Sometimes he was provided with a body-guard, dressed in gaudy colors, with gold lace, bells, and mock jewels.

About the twelfth century the clergy introduced miracle-plays, some of them beginning with the Creation and finishing with Dives in hell and Lazarus in Abraham's bosom, which gave grand opportunities for pyrotechnic effects.

But it was above all at table that Christmas mirth and merriment culminated. As a well-known author says, "Man's gastronomic capacity must have been enlarged for the occasion, as the energies expand to meet great emergencies." We read of feasts where sixteen courses of meat were served. Boar's head, capons, geese, turkeys, brawn, plum pudding, minced pies—it almost satisfies the appetite to read of such plenty.

The boar's head was the "*pièce de résistance*." It was suggested that its appropriateness to Christmas festivities was a kind of anti-Judaical test, because the Jews could not eat it. Soused and garnished with sprigs of sweet-scented herbs, it was carried into the dining-hall by the Master of the Revels, and followed by choristers singing in its honor. The bearer of the boar's head was so honorable an office that Henry II. bore it to the table of his son, to do honor to the young prince, preceded by trumpeters. Special carols were written for it.

The bore's head, I understande,  
Is the chefe servyce in this lande.  
Loke, wherever it be founde,  
Servite cum cantico.

Brawn was another Christmas dish of great antiquity. "Brawn, mustard, and malmsey" was Queen Elizabeth's favorite breakfast. Sandys says that the French, at the capture by them of Calais, found a large quantity of it, and tried in vain every way of preparing it. "Its merits being at last discovered, 'Ha!' said the monk, 'what a delightful fish!' and added it to his fast-day viands. The Jew, again, could not believe it procured from that unclean animal, the hog, and included it in his list of clean animals."

Swans were standard dishes formerly at great houses at Christmas. Chaucer speaks of "a fat swan roasted."

Plum pudding and mince pies always made part of the Christmas feast. The former was anciently called "hackin," from the word "to hack, to chop." Hone defines it as "a large sort of sausage, made of mince-meat, seasoned well with sugar and spices." Tradition said that it must be boiled at daybreak, or else "two young men must take the maiden [the cook] by the arms, and run her around the market place, to punish her for her laziness."

Mince pies at first were called "shred pies," and were made in an oblong form, to represent the manger. As a prominent concomitant of Christmas festivities the pies fell under Puritan condemnation, and it was, therefore, considered even a test of loyalty by the Cavaliers to eat them. John Bunyan, during his imprisonment, is said to have refused to partake of this delectable compound, even when distressed for a comfortable meal. At first mutton was the only meat that entered into their composition, in allusion to the flocks watched on the holy night by the shepherds of Bethlehem. The spices were supposed to commemorate the wise men from the Orient—the land of spices.

Such heavy eating was accompanied by potations equally

powerful. The wassail-bowl formed part of every Christmas entertainment. The word is derived from "was-haile," which was the ancient phrase among the Saxons for pledging one another—"haile" meaning health.

The original wassail-bowl was the skull of an enemy—that grim wine-cup being in favor with the early Saxons. Its contents were wine, spiced and sweetened, with roasted apples floating on its surface; but, as Leigh Hunt says, "it is a good-natured bowl, accommodating itself to the means of all classes," and is often made of ale with nutmeg, ginger, sugar, toast, and crab-apples roasted. It should be stirred with a sprig of rosemary.

The practice of decorating the churches, houses, and even the shops and markets with branches and wreaths of evergreen, holly, box, rosemary, ivy, laurel, bay, mistletoe, and "whatever the yeare afforded to be greene" existed from the earliest days, in spite of the Puritan protest against "such heathen abominations."

The holly was held sacred because tradition says that Christ's crown was made of holly. When the briers touched his brow they softened into pointed leaves, and the berries, which had been white before, were dyed scarlet with his blood.

It was the custom among the young folks to throw branches and sprigs of laurel upon the Christmas fire, and, by the curling and crackling of the leaves, to presage good or evil fortune. This Christmas fire was made of the famous Yule-log, which was frequently the root of a large tree, introduced into the house with great ceremony, and left in "ponderous majesty" on the kitchen floor until each had sung his Yule or Christmas carol standing on its center. "Yule" means a festival or holy-day. "Gwyl" in Welsh has the same signification.

A branch of mistletoe was usually suspended over the doorway or from the ceiling in the middle of the room. The Druids held the mistletoe sacred, and the chief priest, clad all in white, cut it from the oak with a golden sickle. The Christians accepted it as a symbol of the Trinity, because its berries grow in clusters of three. A piece hung around the neck was considered a safeguard against witches as late as the seventeenth century. Sandys says: "In modern times it has a tendency to lead us toward witches of a more attractive nature, for, as is well known, if you can by favor or cunning induce a fair one to come under the mistletoe, you are entitled to a salute." The maid that was not caught and kissed under it would not be married within the year—so the tradition goes. Brand says that the ceremony was not properly performed unless a berry was pulled off with each kiss and presented to the maiden for good luck, and Washington Irving tells us that "when all the berries are plucked, the privilege ceases." Music and singing are the natural accompaniments of seasons of rejoicing, and the Christmas carols expressed religious fervor in joyous strains. The word carol comes from "cantare," to sing, and "rola," an interjection of joy. A writer of the sixteenth century says, "He is taken by a song, that will flye a sermon." In England it is still the custom for bands of choristers called "waits" to go about on Christmas Eve and sing carols.

In France in the Middle Ages people seemed to see nothing incongruous in their priests prefacing their sermons by crowing like cocks, in memory of St. Peter, or braying to recall the ass of Balaam.

In Berlin, at Christmas, the streets are lined with fir-trees. The royal square is filled with booths made of evergreen boughs, containing toys and all manner of gewgaws for sale. They are lighted with myriads of wax tapers, and, as a recent writer tells us, they look, with their kaleidoscopic ornaments, "like huge Christmas-trees."

In many of the principal churches of Italy a corner is set apart at Christmas-time in which, amid some rude rock-work, intended to represent the cave or stable at Bethlehem, wax or papier-maché figures of the Holy Child and its mother are to be seen—and often ignorantly worshiped by the less enlightened. The central figure is called the "bambino," which is the Italian for "baby."

In England the "waits" do the serenading. They are the degenerate descendants of those ancient bards who

either formed part of the establishment of the great nobles, or wandered from place to place, to tournament or festival. It was the duty of the chief member of the band of minstrels in royal or noble houses to go from door to door at night and tell the watches upon some musical instrument. He was called a "wayte"—probably a corruption of "watch"—and the street watchman of later days was his successor.

The "mummers" that are still seen in the country in England are the relics of the old mystery plays. Scott, in his notes to "Marmion," speaks of having taken part in one of these plays with his companions, entitled "St. George and the Dragon," in which St. Peter carries the keys, and Judas the contribution-bag. Harvey says that so unfamiliar were the actors with history that they introduced General Wolfe, and even the Duke of Wellington, as an antagonist to St. George.

We hear of "Christmas boxes" in England. These are now no longer boxes full of gifts, but any present is distinguished by the old name which is given at this season. They pass only from the rich to the poor, and from master to dependent, and are not reciprocal in their distribution.

It is still the practice in London, and in some other parts of England, for tradesmen, servants, and pensioners of all kinds, any who have any claim, from the parish beadle to the dustman, to ring the bell, and wish the master and mistress all happiness and a merry Christmas, presenting them with a copy of printed doggerel which they call verses.

In some parts of rural England the old superstitious belief that the oxen kneel in their stalls on Christmas Eve in adoration of the Nativity is still held. It is said that, on this night only of all the year, the quivering aspen has rest. "For eighteen centuries her leaves have shivered with the guilty consciousness that she furnished the wood for the cross of Christ. On Christmas Eve she rests, remembering that she also furnished the wood for the Redeemer's cradle."

For one hour on Christmas Eve the lost spirits have rest. Judas sleeps, Herod ceases to clank his chain, the daughter of Herodias may pause in the dance in which she is condemned to spin forever, and Pontius Pilate's ghost ceases its wanderings on Mount Pilatus. At midnight the animals are endued with the power of speech. The sounds of church-bells will be heard wherever a church has stood, though no trace be left. If you lie in a manger, you will see your future.

From the earliest times it seems to have been an accompaniment of festival seasons to exchange gifts and make donations to the poor. In the Book of Esther the Jews are commanded to "make them days of feasting and joy, and of sending of portions to one another, and of gifts to the poor."

In Germany there is a legend that when Eve plucked the fatal apple, immediately the leaves of the tree shriveled into needle-points, and its bright green turned dark. It changed its nature and became the evergreen in all seasons, preaching the story of man's fall. Only on Christmas does it bloom brightly with lights and become beautiful with love-gifts—the curse is changed to a blessing by the coming of the Christ-child—and we have our Christmas-tree.

St. Nicholas or Santa Claus was a saint of the fourth century, of fabulous beneficence and goodness. He loved children, and was therefore adopted as the patron saint of school-boys. His was a genial and kindly nature, and a beautiful exception to the asceticism of his age.

The example of the entrance of the good saint into modern homes was set him by Hertha, a Norse goddess. At the festival held in her honor the houses were decked with evergreens, and an altar of stones set up at the end of the hall where the family assembled. Hence, from Hertha's stones, the word "hearthstone." Upon these stones were piled fir-branches which were set on fire, and through the dense smoke made by the green wood the goddess was supposed to descend and influence the direction of the flames from which the fortunes of those present were predicted.



# A School-house Christmas

By Clifton Johnson

With Illustrations from Photographs by the Author



Trimming the School-house Tree

**I**N the town the folks have their Christmas at the church. It is the dull season of the farm year, and where there are so many people and so much unoccupied talent lying around loose, they can get up very grand affairs. But, however dazzling these entertainments in the church vestry are, I doubt if they ever attain the charm and naturalness of the humbler festivities in the school-houses of the outlying hamlets. The school-house speakers and actors are so sure to be interesting and individual in their manner that you readily forget a possible artificiality of subject. They do things with more style in the larger places, but in their celebrations the attractive individuality that glows in the school-house performance is very apt to get smoothed out into mannerism.

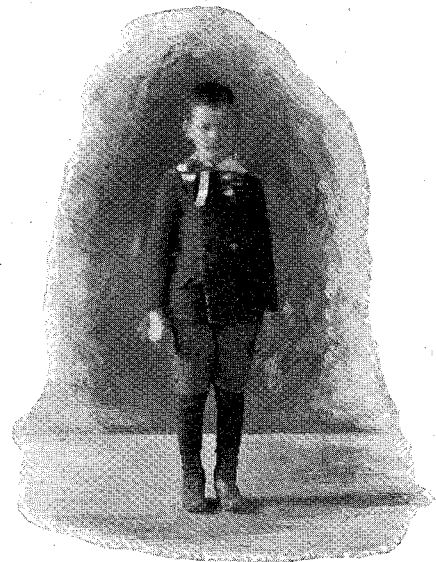
The scholars of the school itself furnish the backbone of these village entertainments. They each have a piece to speak; some of them are in a dialogue; and they come out on the floor several times, all together, and stand in rows with the teacher, to sing such songs as they have learned. They depend a great deal on their teacher; for she picks out their pieces, drills them, and when they stand before the audience she is behind the curtain ready to prompt when they forget the words.

In addition to what the children do, there is a scattering of tableaux, declamations, and songs from the

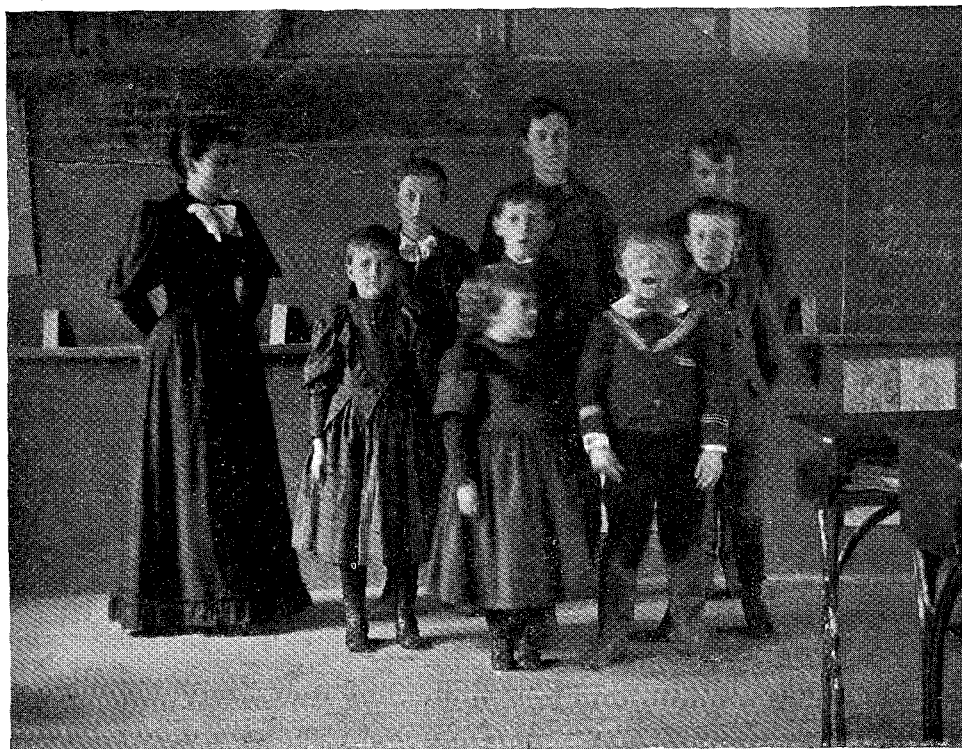
grown-up young people of the village, and at the close of the exercises the Christmas-tree is unloaded and a lunch is served.

The school-house is such a pocket of a place that there is no spare elbow-room when audience and actors are present. A narrow space at one end is curtained off for a stage, and a few square feet extra are occupied by the Christmas-tree and an organ brought in from one of the neighbors'. The rest of the floor, including the aisles between the desks, is packed with chairs borrowed at the nearer homes.

Space limitations and the difficulty of managing a lot of children, full of excitement over the glory of the occasion, make it unwise to attempt any very elaborate things. Nearly everything that is to be found in the dialogue line has to be ruled out on this account. Most that has been published is not only too elaborate, but is not suited to the place either in matter or manner. What is needed is something short, that requires few actors, unless for tableau effects, and that has a homely picturesqueness of expression and of situations that shall be pleasant and natural from the country child's point of view. This does not make it any the worse for acting elsewhere,



One of the Boys Speaks a Piece



The School Sings a Song