

OLD CHRISTMAS CUSTOMS IN ENGLAND

To us children (writes Dom Basil Weld, O.S.B.), the first joys of the coming Christmas commenced even before Advent, on the last Sunday of the ecclesiastical year, which from time immemorial has been known as 'Stir up Sunday.' The origin of this appellation is to be found in the Prayer of the Mass of that day, 'Stir up, O Lord, we beseech Thee,' etc. Consequent upon this, the twenty-fourth Sunday after Pentecost was chosen as an appropriate day for the 'housewife' to produce the mince for the Christmas pies, and everyone of the household was supposed to sample it, and then to make a wish which was to be revealed to no one. This last was of course the most difficult thing of all. Later on came the making of the Christmas puddings, the stirring of which, in every well-regulated household, was a matter of prime importance. This had to be done in turn, not only by all the family, but also by all resident in the house. How the children did enjoy it! The spoon had to be moved round to follow the sun! Then a ring and a button and a thimble and a crooked sixpence were added to the mixture. Recollect the mirth this occasioned as each speculated which would fall to the other's lot. And it depended on the ring, the button, and the thimble, whether one was to be

known for the log to be so large as to set the house on fire! Very commonly the log was wrapped round with twisted hazel boughs, and then, as these bindings were one by one burned off, ale, mingled with spirits and spice, was passed round to the exceeding merriment and increasing hilarity of the company. Another thing that occupied on this busy day many hands and minds was the house decoration. This was a most important duty, and it contributed not a little to the sentiment of Christmas.

In the evening of Christmas Eve when the log fire was first kindled the Christmas candles were also lighted, and in the days of no lamps these great torches of wax lent their lustre to the night. Those were indeed the golden days of merry-making, and on Christmas Eve the feudal chieftain used to gather round his hearth as one family his whole household; distinctions were set aside, and all—from atheling to yeoman, from earldorman to thane—whilst they sat round the fire in the great hall 'watching with the shepherds' till midnight, or till it was time 'for to gang a-church,' used to spend the merry time singing together carols. After the Midnight Mass, the folks coming home used to assemble again in the great hall to a supper prepared, at which were served to each bowls of mutton brotn, and then the Christmas cake would be cut, and each would partake of a cup of elderberry wine. This was an old tradition, and it used to be enjoyed by all in the highest



RURAL SCENE, NEAR WAIMATE.

married before the year was out, to become an old bachelor or an aged maid! The sixpence, however, always brought luck—luck which, in the first instance, was ready money.

As Advent sped by, the 'waits' or carol singers would appear, and in front of the dining-room window or the hall-door give vent to their gleeful feelings by merrily singing some pretty little Christmas ditty, which would at once arouse in the hearts and minds of their hearers pleasant memories—sacred and profane—of this holy season in the past. A reward to the little singers was not usually long delayed, and it was the joy of the house-children to present it. In some places, these carol singers used to commence their rounds even as early as Martinmas.

On the eve of Christmas there were always many things to do—all the preparations for the feast had to be made complete, and the pulse of the household told of a feeling of excited expectancy. One great event for which in olden times the whole family were wont to turn out was the procuring and bringing in of the yule-log, or 'clog,' as it was sometimes called. This was an ash or birch log—the largest possible that could be procured and that the fireplace would permit of; for it was an important tradition that the yule-log fire was not to be allowed to go out from Christmas Eve till after the feast of the Epiphany, and a fragment had to be preserved to kindle the fire in the following year. While the log lasted the servants were entitled to ale at their meals. Indeed, it was not un-

known for the cry of 'Ule, Ule, Ule!'—and 'A Merry Christmas!' all round.

Both spiritually and temporally, Christmas Day itself was full of interest. From time immemorial there have been three Masses on Christmas Day, and these the faithful were wont to attend with great fervor and joy of spirit; but when the spiritual side of the feast had been duly cared for, our forefathers were not slow to also take advantage of the temporal blessings God had given them wherewith to enjoy their yuletide.

The twelve days of Christmastide were declared by King Alfred the Great to be legal holidays, and on them in olden times all labor and toil ceased. During these days everybody endeavored to do what he could to add to the merriment of the season. Hospitality was profuse on all sides. Even the birds of the air, and the cattle of the field, were not forgotten.

The Christmas dinner was a great 'do.' The banquet generally commenced with a plum-broth, or porridge, called backin until the time of Charles II. It was a veritable hotch-potch, of which these were the chief ingredients: A log of veal, six shins of beef, 150 lemons and oranges, six dozen of sack, six dozen old hock, six dozen sherry, 50 lb of sugar, and 50 fourpenny loaves—this was brought up to the level of the pot brim by the addition of quantities of currants and raisins or prunes, 'two ounces cochineal, one ounce nutmeg, one ounce cinnamon, and one ounce of cloves.' It was supposed, it is said, to represent the