

## CHRISTMAS RECOLLECTIONS.

## Midnight Mass Under Differing Conditions.

## A Fairy Story.

I was detailed with some other students to assist at the church ceremonies on Christmas Eve. It was in the south of France I was then sojourning and, strange to say, the young people, with whom I formed intimate associations, were not very much different in appearance and character from those with whom I had been accustomed to live and play and frolic in Ireland. The part of France I was assigned to for education was a mountainous district, amid the hills and valleys of the Cevennes, where St. Francis Regis once prayed and taught. It is generally remarked, and experience proves the truth of the remark, that people who inhabit mountainous plateaus and hill side villages are more unsophisticated and more simple in their manners, and probably in consequence more attached to their religion and more virtuous than the city populations or those who live down on the plain. The people I met with in those elevated localities of Southern France were simple and unpretentious in their habits and in manners affable and sympathetic. Their Catholic faith permeated and gave direction to all their acts whether public or private. The feast days of the Church were days of public rejoicing for the whole community. All took part in the ceremonials; the civic authorities joined with the priest in proclaiming public holidays; the professions, the tradesmen and soldiers and religious confraternities, all took up their positions and were assigned places in the open air religious processions. Those mountain villages were so many happy families where all joined together in reverent worship in the forenoon and gave themselves up to boisterous merriment and unrestrained though innocent gaiety towards evening.

Corpus Christi, or the *Fete Dieu*, is the day of all days for the expansion of heart and uplifting of souls in those Catholic centres, where no shadow of doubt ever dims the sunshine of simple Faith and implicit trust is given to all the priest says and Holy Church teaches. The houses are all festooned and garlanded, the very streets over which the procession must pass are carpeted with rose leaves and petals of every flower that blooms—repositories of green and gold stand high in the public squares. The blare of trumpets is heard and choristers fill the air with hymns of joy—while acolytes swinging censers and surpliced priests advance bearing the Sacred Host under a huge canopy that is followed by the Mayor and all the civic dignitaries with bowed heads and reverent demeanor.

All this I have witnessed with rapture in many towns and villages in Catholic France and oft have I said to myself, when will this be possible in Catholic Ireland? Away back in 1846 I was detailed with a few others to take part in the parish ceremonial of midnight Mass of a large city. The streets were crowded with people going to and fro; all were no going to the churches, but all were out for the quiet enjoyment of the Christmas holiday. There was no noisy disturbance of any kind, no sign of levity or disorder, much less of any thing that savoured of impiety or intemperance. But the parish Church was crowded. The aisles and nave and sanctuary were lit up with a thousand twinkling tapers and colored lamps burning olive oil. The perfume of cedar and bay leaves that twined round the pillars filled the temple, while the fragrance of smoking incense in the Sanctuary, and the sweet mellow voices heard from the choir chanting Gloria in Excelsis made one fancy that Heaven and Earth were easily blended, and that the Prophecy

of Isaiah was fulfilled "Lo! Earth receives Him from the bonding skies. Sink down ye mountains and ye valleys rise." The grand high Mass with deacon, sub-deacon and master of ceremonies commenced at midnight. An orchestra of several instruments, accompanied the rendition of Mozart's 7th Mass. The many trained voices that reached with ease the highest soprano and lowest bass notes with the organ's solemn peal produced an effect on the audience that was simply ravishing.

At the offertory the "Pastors," just then published by Father Lambillote, was heard for the first time, and at the end of Mass, while the hundreds who received communion were wrapt in adoration making their thanksgiving a choir of infantile voices with organ accompaniment intoned from a side chapel the beautiful Christmas hymn, "Noel, Noel, Salut a Noel." On our way back to the college the streets were yet thronged with pious people all quietly wending their way home from the different churches. It was then about 2 a.m., and neither young or old seemed wearied or inclined to sleep, a band of little fellows who preceded as were going from door to door singing,

Il est né le Divin enfant  
Jouez haut-boys reconnex musettes,  
Il est né le Divin enfant  
Chantons tous Son avènement.

Which translated in English might be:

Lo! he's born the Infant King  
Strike the harp and sound the tymbrel  
Lo! he's born the Infant King,  
Let all in concert His advent sing.

The impression left by that night's Christmas celebration can never be effaced from mind or memory.

How such a nation, such a people with all the hallowed traditions, and venerable customs, and both royal and saintly ancestors with the ages of faith and its chevaliers sans peur et sans reproche, can tolerate the impiety and the blasphemy that rules them from Paris is one of the most insolvable of modern mysteries.

## A CHRISTMAS DAY IN IRELAND—MIDNIGHT MASS.

It was my lot also to witness a Christmas celebration in Ireland about the same period. I was sojourning with some relatives in the neighbourhood of the Slieve Bloom range of mountains when Christmas approached and midnight Mass was announced. The parish church, however, was not designated as the proper place for attending midnight Mass. A quarter of a century had scarcely passed since the penal laws prevailed, when it was considered high treason either to celebrate or assist at the public celebration of the Holy Sacrifice. The people had been accustomed to steal away from their homes after darkness set in and reach the appointed glen, or the little chapel concealed in some sheltered vale—where the confessions would be heard, and Holy Mass offered up, and all the people blessed and made happy before daylight; when time would still be to reach home in safety and thus escape detection and punishment by the officers of the law. It appeared to me then that midnight Mass in Ireland was intended not only to commemorate the miraculous Birth of the Saviour of Mankind, but also to keep up and perpetuate, at least in memory, the dark days of penal persecution.

On this occasion the midnight Mass was offered up in a large, extensive parlour of the parochial residence, which was at least two miles distant from the parish church. Three other chapels in the same parish were yet more distant, but it could be said fairly that the priest's house was in the middle of the parish. It was a little after ten when I with some friends arrived at the priest's house. There were a few horses and wagons of old-fashioned style and material already

in the haggard adjoining the residence. My friend on alighting tethered his horse to a post, then went deliberately to a stack of oats not yet threshed and drew away an armful of provender for the animal, which did not require any pressing to eat the priest's oats most greedily. On remonstrating with my friend I learned that such was the custom, as the priest was above want and had oats to spare. I looked at the other horses and found them without exception enjoying their forbidden fruit with keen relish. Several people were in the large kitchen on chairs or benches in solemn silence, and some were kneeling in preparation for confession. After a little while a man came out from the hall and another went in, then some boys went and came one after another, then some women replaced each other until about sixty or more had confessed and were reciting their beads, probably their penance. Mass began precisely at midnight. There was no music—no organ peal or hymns of any kind. These all passed away out of Ireland when liberty of worship was proscribed and £5 reward was set on the head of a priest saying Mass. But if there was no organ, there was intense devotion. There was solemn, profound adoration and the life-giving faith of martyrs. Nearly all received communion, and at the end of the holy service the priest—who must have been seventy years past—spoke in very feeling words to the congregation. His address was more in the nature of an act of thanksgiving to God, in which the people joined, than of an exhortation to sinners who needed conversion. After this every man present and some women advanced and placed an offering of a shilling or a crown on the temporary altar. The priest again blessed them, all kneeling, returned thanks for their generous gifts and wished them from his heart a very holy and very happy Christmas. It was all done in the simplicity and intensity of primitive faith, but it is questionable if the cathedral celebrations, and blare of trumpets, and organ's deafening music were more pleasing to God than the quiet, heartfelt devotion of that aged priest and those simple-hearted rural populations amid the hills and glens of St. Patrick's holy isle.

## A CHRISTMAS FAIRY TALE.

On our return journey from the priest's house we drove several miles along the well kept macadamised road that leads from Berrisokane. The weather was delightfully mild and calm for midwinter and the full moon lit up with silvery rays the low-lying plain and trees and streams we hurriedly passed on the way. Suddenly a dark shadow fell on our path and for some time obscured the shifting landscape from view. A hill of several hundred feet rose abruptly from the green fields to our left and completely shaded us from Luna's slanting beams. "Does that hill enjoy any particular name?" I asked of my friend who held the reins. "Most certainly," he replied, "there is scarcely one rood of ground in Ireland to which some distinctive name characteristic of the spot is not attached. This hill that now overshadows our path enjoys the honour of a very euphonious title. We call it Knockshegawna—which in plain English means The Hill of the Queen of the Fairies." "And have you any just reason for calling a hill by such a heathenish name?" "Why, of course, we have every reason. Pray, look along the edges where the scintillating rays are veiling with the penumbra of yonder cleft in the rocks. Do you not see the little gentlemen sporting in their playful gambols, some on foot and some astride diminutive ponies, clearing the furze bushes and the thick set hedges? You don't. Oh! Well, were you riding past the side lit up by the moon's rays, or were you returning from a wedding feast or

a christening, instead of coming from your Christmas devotions, the probability is that you would see them sporting or frolicking by the scores or the hundreds. Did you ever hear the story of Mick Nowlan, the noggin-maker?" "Never in my life." "Well, that clump of an oak tree we just passed in the very spot where Mick Nowlan, some years ago, had an experience with the Fairy Queen and her gentlemen. I suppose you know that Irish fairies are also named the good people, because they never injure any person, although invested with supernatural power. They are not vicious or malignant like the Lutins and Gobelins of Brittany, or the Ghouls of Persia. The Irish fairies are all sport and merriment, and the Clericane or Linnahaune can tell you where a crook of 'gould' is hid if you only hold him long enough and keep your eye on him all the time. When you hold him tight in your grip and are just worrying the secret out of him, he diverts your attention by saying perhaps, 'Oh! there goes the King,' or 'There goes your mother,' and you turn your head to see, when, presto! he disappears and your prospect of finding 'the crook o' goold,' has vanished also. But with all their goodness the Irish fairies are addicted to one very mischievous trick, that of stealing away beautiful little infants or handsome young brides and leaving in their stead little withered old lugs or witches with sunken eyes and emaciated bodies. Mick Nowlan was on his way from Lorrha, his birthplace, to the fair of Shinnone. He carried on his back and shoulders a bundle of his wooden ware. That was light enough burthen when taken a short distance, but rather heavy and tiresome when carried all the way from one fair to another. Mick called in at the cross of Ballingarry for rest and refreshments. Some neighbouring boys insisted on his accepting a few treats, and then when passing a shebeen near the Pike he could not resist the temptation of another glass and of filling his pipe for another blast because the night was chilly though otherwise bright and clear. By the time he reached the section of country wherein we now are he felt tired and drowsy. He turned off the road towards that clump of oak-tree to which I have just called your attention, and sat down with his back against it, his bundle of noggins supporting both head and shoulders. He was not there very long when a troop of fairies on swift ponies came in full gallop down from the top of Knockshegawna. They cantered and capered about on the road until they spied the noggin maker.

'Here's Mick Nowlan,' screamed the foremost one. 'He must be with us,' said another. Fetch him a horse, said Queen Mab, 'he shall ride along beside me.' A high spirited pony was soon prancing and curvetting before the astonished noggin-maker. But he was more astonished and yet more bewildered when he was seized by the two arms and lifted into the saddle. Away the whole cavalcade flew taking hedges and fences and rivers at a bound. But each time they landed on the other side the bundle of noggins that were lifted high in the jump came down with a sudden thud on Mr. Nowlan's back that threw him out on the neck of his charger, almost dismounting him. After a break neck ride of one hour's duration, they reached a farmer's house in the vicinity of Nenagh, where a joyous wedding feast was being held. They all dismounted Mick Nowlan with the rest. 'Now,' said Queen Mab, 'we must secure the hand some bride just wedded in this house; there is no more innocent, no fairer creature on this whole earth. This night we must introduce her to our gilded halls in the caves and grottoes of Knockshegawna's hill. All we have to accomplish is to effect her sneezing three times without any person, even