

## WEIHNACHTSZEIT

On the first Sunday in Advent the first of the four Advent candles — one for each of the four Sundays — is lit on the Christmas wreath which decorates every German house. Christmas in Germany is very much a family affair and on this Sunday all the relations and close friends of the family begin, with considerable formality, the series of Sunday visits to partake of the vast quantities of spiced cookies, gingerbread, iced cakes, "apfel strudel" and other dainties which the female members of the family have spent many hours preparing, and which must last from now until Christmas Day. The children, dressed in their smartest frocks and suits, are beginning to get excited for, on December 6, St. Nicholas Day, comes the mysterious visit of the "Weihnachtsmann". On that night the children put their shoes outside their bedroom doors when they go to bed and, lo, in the morning the shoes are filled with candies and sweets of all kinds. It is surprising how suddenly some small feet seem to grow; to judge by the size of the shoes which appear.

The festivities continue until, on Christmas Eve, the children are chased off to their rooms to await the arrival of the "Christmas Angel" who brings the Christmas tree. After a suitable period for meditation and preparation they are once more summoned to the living room and there, to their delighted gaze, glistens and shines the tree. Father has been busy during the interval fixing and lighting the white candles on the tree — none of your new-fangled coloured electric lights — and arranging beneath it all the presents. If he is wise he also arranges a large tub of water in the vicinity! Only white candles or white lights are the tradition because they symbolize, I am told, the white clear gleam of the star of Bethlehem. The rest of the evening follows the familiar pattern with the opening of the presents; and a tired but happy family retires late to bed.

We were honoured last year by an invitation to visit the Doctor and his family on Christmas Day. On our way across the city we admired the decorations in the streets. Strings of white lights running along the length of the street on both sides and, crossing from one side of the street to the other, magnificent illuminated arches of greenery, bedecked with stars and crowns, gnomes and animals of all kinds. The shops all brilliantly lighted displayed their wares attractively bound in coloured ribbons. The cake and marzipan shops enticed the curiosity, if not the appetite, with rich confections in the shapes of fruits, flowers,

vegetables, animals, and even public buildings, in number and variety to stagger the imagination. In particular the flower shops showed an ingenuity in design and arrangement of such a profusion of blooms and Christmas wreaths, from orchids, through cyclamen, roses and chrysanthemum, to the humble spruce twigs and pine cones as would have reduced a disciple of Constance Spry to utter despair.

The Doctor's family consisted of his wife and two sons, students at the University, and his mother-in-law, a grand old lady of 83. We were greeted warmly on arrival and were shown into the living room where we met also the Doctor's brother-in-law, a lawyer in the city and an authority on its history. Our German was not up to sustaining conversation for a whole evening, but the Doctor and his family spoke some English — all except mother-in-law who was also rather deaf — so that a good deal of friendly banter and merriment enlivened the time as we unwittingly committed outrageous mistakes in each other's pronunciation and idiom. Mother-in-law made courageous efforts to keep up, but her affliction prevented her from appreciating much of the fun and she soon retired to bed. The Doctor's wife confided that this was really rather a blessing because her mother, being a woman of great spirit, refused not to take her share in the strenuous work in the kitchen. But being rather shaky in her movements the destruction of crockery (she insisted on doing the dishes) during the long festive season had placed a heavy strain on the household's resources.

We agreed on the way home it had been a good day. We had enjoyed ourselves with the Doctor and his family. During the war we had both suffered at each other's hands, but all that seemed long ago and forgotten. Different languages and different customs seemed to blend in the spirit of the season, and it was peaceful as we drove back through the clear frosty night.

Only one thing strikes us as curious — there are no Christmas cards on display in German homes. When they come they are just stowed away in a drawer.