

Christmas and New Year in Old Quebec

By William Lutton

IN the parish church of Notre Dame, Montreal, fifteen thousand "faithful" hear the midnight mass on Christmas Eve. Every inch of space is crowded. The three great tiers present a vast sea of faces, solemnized by the impressiveness of the occasion. The church is one blaze of innumerable lights; points of flame quiver on the grand altars.

The music, at once mournful and

which can possibly be communicated to it under the existing circumstances.

In the early hours of the morning the people drive to their homes. There is little sleep for anybody. The houses along the way show the welcome ray; and anybody may drop in and share in the plentiful food which is set before the visitor.

But it is the New Year time which discloses all the quaintness, all the

prise and when the visitors get out of the sleigh, the old couple rush to the door with boisterous greetings as though they had just dropped from the clouds. And, this is repeated all the forenoon.

Feasting and merrymaking ensue. Every man who has a sleigh, harnesses his horse and proceeds to make his New Year calls. The women of the house are supposed to stay at home and entertain the men folk. The habit is falling somewhat into destitute, which is a pity. It may have been productive of ill effects in the city, through the repetition of the customary glass of wine, but in the country parts the glass of gooseberry, or cherry, or elderberry, is innocuous. There may be a little drop of gin in the kitchen to which the old man invites his particular friends—a drop of square fare on the cold and biting day.

In the evening the young men drive to visit their sweethearts, and the night is spent in dancing and feasting and merry-making. Every village or parish boasts a fiddler who is requisitioned for the dance. The kitchen and dining-room are made into one and both thrown open to the guests. The women and girls are dressed up, while the men show special sartorial effects—comically incongruous in many cases where the simplicity of nature is poorly replaced by the elaboration of art.

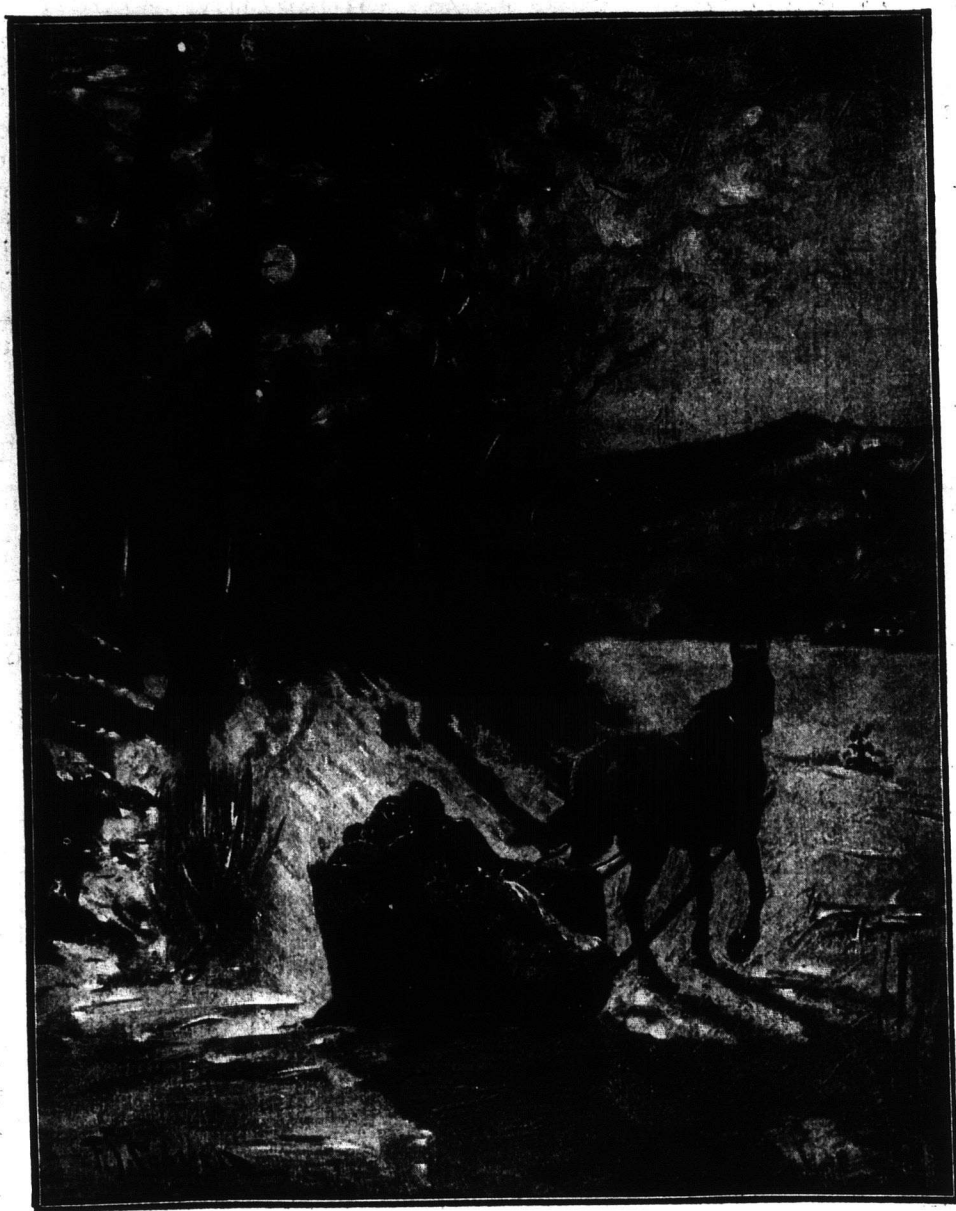
When the fiddler strikes up "Money-musk" all is forgotten but the joy of

is remindel that he or she is tired. The visiting is kept up for nearly a week in the country, the holiday occurring at the time of year when there is not a great deal to do on the farm.

On New Year's eve the tradition of "La Chasse Galerie" has fulfillment. Many of the young men go to the shanty in the winter when the work gets slack on the farm. It is impossible for them to get back at the New Year time, but there is compulsive force in love and longing. We do not know all the secrets of the invisible. Certain it is without splitting hairs about it, that when the young girl thinking of her lover on New Year, looks up at the sky, she sees him in the air sailing in a celestial boat—himself and others, all paddling for dear life, all bent on meeting their sweethearts as the boat glides nearer and nearer to earth.

Is that not a veritable kiss too,—light and elusive, but real—a kiss from the "boy" who is loved all the more in absence. Both feel it at the same time, at the same moment! the girl in her home and the lover in the shanty on the Gatineau. Explain it how you will, whether by folklore or telepathy, or thought transference, the ghostly boat is there and the girl sees it and knows that it contains her lover who, nevertheless, cannot come to her in the flesh.

But that is only one of the quaint features of the simple habitant life. The lutins, or as we would call them,



After Midnight Mass, New Year in Quebec

triumphant, makes poignant impression. The priests are gorgeous in varicolored vestments,—scarlet, gold, and purple, and attended by a large number of acolytes, all in white. What with the lights and color and music; the pressure of numbers, heightening feeling and urging expectancy; the nearness of the Sacred Event which is in all minds,—the effect is rememberable.

And yet, for a characteristic expression of the holiday time in Quebec, one must go to the country parts. There the people drive into the village for miles to the parish church which has been gayly and floridly decorated for the occasion. There are tinsel and lamps and candles and paper flowers. Bunting is stretched across the altars. The Infant Jesus is in his manger, decked out with green boughs and roofed with straw. His Mother is there in all the verisimilitude of the life-size figure. Old and young are there; the church is crowded. Nay,—many must stand outside in the frosty night, with the stars glittering in the steely blue. The young people drive in the old-fashioned burrow, made for two, as the picture sets forth.

There are certain camaraderie permissible on this special night. And the sheepish look on the faces of the young men and women as they move towards the church from their sleigh might augur early marriages.

The organ peals. The mass proceeds with all the glory and impressiveness

hospitality and religious feeling of French life in the province. The English people make their gifts at Christmas. Our French friends postpone their gifts until the New Year—jour d'An. In the city you have the express messenger which is the death of poetry. In the country the presents must be carried personally. The sleigh drives up on New Year's Eve; out come the parcels, amid shouts of merriment. The visitor is welcomed with open arms. The gifts are carefully put away till the morning.

One hears all night the merry ringing of the sleigh bells as the kindly people move from house to house in the country bringing their little gifts.

On New Year's morning the children of the family, big and little, kneel before their parents and ask their blessing. This is a touching ceremony. Possibly the city families have become too sophisticated for this traditional habit; but in the country the simple people are not ashamed of the demonstrations of affection. Sons and daughters at a distance make the greatest efforts to reach the old home on New Year's morning for the parental blessing. The old man is smoking his pipe in the corner. The table is supplied with all sorts of eatables and drinkables. The good wife looks out of the tail of her eye and sees the visitor coming up the road; but the desire is to create sur-



"La Chasse Galerie"

the moment. The spirit of happiness and abandon infects young and old. The fiddler gets warm, the men begin to shed their coats, the master of ceremonies cries—"swing your partner," "down the middle." The old men who have been standing round feel the stir of youth in their old bones and take the floor. The dance becomes faster and faster. The sense of rivalry is set up and bets are made as to how long this or that couple can keep the floor. There is a lull for the hearty supper served in the kitchen and which consists of cold turkey and cranberry sauce with lots of tea and, in some cases, beer thrown in.

Then, after a half hour for digestion, the fun is resumed and the scene on the wintry sky before even the oldest

"the little people," and who may be in the form of a cat or dog, or even a snake (strange as this may be) live close to the French people; follow their fortunes with interest; are benevolent or malicious according as they are treated, at the New Year time bring gifts to those who have been kind to them during the year—a white dress for the latest child, perhaps the twelfth for race suicide has not yet invaded the back parishes; a bottle of gin for the old man; a raccoon coat for the mother—the patient soul, who is a martyr to what she calls religious duty.

To suspect human agency would argue an unfeeling and abandoned nature. This is the poetic touch which