

regarded in England. It indicates the supreme place the day holds among the festal days of the year. It is a reminiscence of a time when holidays were not so common in "Merrie England" as they are now, and when the great holiday of the birth of Christ was treasured and made the very most of.

Though a heart full of Christmas can make good cheer in the dulllest weather, yet Christmas weather has much to do with Christmas cheer. When the day is without mist or rain, it is matter of thankfulness. When it is clear with a hard frost, it is a cause of sober joy. But when, following a week of keen weather, a good fall of snow has sifted down through the unwept air a day or two before, lying gently on the trees and the hedge rows and the meadows, and then a frost comes on Christmas Eve, and makes the snow crisp and firm and sparkling, then the soul of the season goes into the blood, and the Christmas greetings ring with a heartiness that means that Christmas is going to be merry indeed. Men say to one another: "A real, old-fashioned Christmas, sir!"

Though Christmas stands alone as the crown of the year's gladness, it is waited on by days that go before and prepare for it. There is the choosing of the cards and the gifts that carry the assurance of goodwill. There is the hanging up of the stocking which Santa Claus will come and fill when eyes that tried to keep awake to catch him are at last weighed down with drowsy head. There is the practising of the ringers who make themselves ready to send out across the snow when the hour comes, the music of the "merry, merry bells of Yule." There is on Christmas Eve the visit of the waits who sing, sweet and low, so that their song is as if heard in a dream.

God rest you, merry gentlemen,  
May nothing you dismay,  
For Christ a little child was born  
Upon a Christmas Day."

There is the hanging of the mistletoe and the weaving of the holly round the Christmas hearth. Above all, there is the preparation of the heart and mood; for Christmas is the season when all family quarrels are healed, and those who have been unfriends shake hands and renew friendship, and neighbors who have been unneighbourly come close to each other—the season of peace and goodwill to all mankind.

Christmas divides Englishmen into three classes. There are those, and they are an increasing number, who look upon Christmas Day as a mere holiday, in the sense of a playday, and who spend Christmas as they spend any other holiday, in resting, in pleasuring, in feasting. There are others who regard it as a holy day, on which they must go to church, though they may not darken a church door till Christmas Day comes round again; others of them keeping the whole day sacred as the Fast Day used to be kept in Scotland. And there are others again to whom it is both holy day and holiday; who in the morning attend service, in which the hymns and the lessons and the sermon have in them the spirit of the season, and spend the rest of the day in making merry with friends; closing the day by taking the children to a sacred concert, or to hear the Christmas oratorio "The Messiah."

Christmas observances are changing in England with the changing years; but the feeling wrought into the very nerves of the people by religious custom and tradition, going back into a dim past that no one can tell the beginning of, is still there, and makes the prayer in the "In Memoriam" a not altogether empty one—

"Rise happy morn, rise holy morn,  
Draw forth the cheerful day from night:  
O Father, touch the east and light  
The light that shone when Hope was born."

#### CHRISTMAS IN IRELAND.

Christmas in Ireland is observed very much as Christmas in England. It is the great home-festival of the year. The sons and daughters, children and grand-children, gather round the Christmas fire. The mistletoe in the hall is as attractive to young Irish hearts and lips as it is to those of colder blood. Roast beef, roast turkey, plum pudding, and mince pies, appear and disappear as in less cultured lands.

The one distinctive feature connected with the Christmas season which I remember from a boyhood spent in the South of Ireland is the custom of "hunting the wren." On the morning after Christmas Day—known to the devout people of Southern Ireland as St. Stephen's Day—you are very sure to be awakened by the noise of singing before your door or beneath your bedroom window. You look out and see a company of men and boys singing a curious song, of which I only remember the following verse.

The wren, the wren, the king of all birds,  
St. Stephen's Day he was caught in the furze;  
Although he is little, his family is great,  
So we pray you, good mistress, to give us a treat.  
You also observe that one of the carollers carries a holly bush,

docked out with fantastic ribbons, in the midst of which the poor wren is (or is supposed to be) a prisoner. If the singing is good, the interview between the awakened household and the awakening choristers usually ends in the bestowal of the customary "Christmas-box."

In the *Journal of the Royal Society of Antiquaries in Ireland* (1890-91, p. 240), the Rev. James O'Laverty, P.P., M.R.I.A., tells how a similar custom of hunting the swallow and afterwards begging, prevailed among the boys of ancient Greece (see also Liddell and Scott's *Greek Lexicon* under *Chelidonisma*). Father O'Laverty says that the origin of all these customs must be referred back to the infancy of the Indo-European nations, and the various festivals celebrated by them at sundry seasons of the year, and that it is therefore useless to seek for that origin in Ireland.

The most plausible explanation is that which is given in Brand and Hazlitt's *Popular Antiquities of Great Britain*, where we read:—

"This singular custom is founded on a tradition that in former times a fairy of uncommon beauty exerted such undue influence over the male population, that she, at various times, induced by her sweet voice numbers to follow her into the sea, where they perished. At length a knight-errant sprung up who discovered some means of countervailing the charms used by this siren, and even laid a plot for her destruction, which she only escaped by taking the form of a wren." But a spell was laid upon her, and though she escaped instant annihilation, it was decreed that she must ultimately perish by human hands. Hence the annual pursuit of her by men and boys.

I should add that "the wren-boys," as they are called, are, so far as I can find, unknown north of Dublin, or even in the neighborhood of Dublin itself. Like many another quaint old Irish custom, they were banished by English influence beyond the region of "The Pale." But their memory remains with me amid other memories of the dear old Emerald Isle. Still, far away under the Southern Cross, I fancy I can hear their kindly voices and see their merry Irish faces lit with the gladness of the Christmas time.

I dreamed of wanderings in the woods amongst the holy green;  
I dreamed of my own native cot, and porch with ivy screen;  
I dreamed of lights for ever dimmed—of hopes that can't return—  
And dropped a tear on Christmas fires, that never more can burn.

#### CHRISTMAS IN SCOTLAND.

Christmas in Scotland? Why—that is just Christmas in England, with, however, less of the Church element in it. Still the very name of Christmas sends a throb of joy and expectancy throughout the land as a time when families reunite—when clerks and employes run home to see the old folks—and when the student turns his back on *Alma Mater* to spend a week with his real *Mater*—the dear old lady with the white hair that awaits him in his distant home!

From a social point of view, Christmas in Scotland is very much what it is elsewhere, with its good cheer, its warm hospitality, its mirth, its jollity—yes, even to the evergreens and the mistletoe!

But you ask: "What did we do before Christmas was so generally kept?" Had we no national festival in its stead? Well, yes. New Year's Day was the great Scotch festival. I can remember the zest with which as a boy I looked forward to it, and the various enjoyments that were usually associated with it. I can remember too some things that were scarcely enjoyments, though they were meant to be so. In particular I would refer to "First-fittin'." It was dying out in my boyhood, and long since it has passed away altogether. But all the more I may just say a word about this old custom. It sprang from the root of kindness—the desire to be the first to wish their friends "A happy New Year!" Hence the name "First-footing;" that is, trying to be the first foot that crossed a friend's threshold. And in this in itself there was no harm. There was harm, however, in its accompaniments, for the visitor invariably carried with him a bottle of whisky, and *nolens volens* everyone who did not wish to be set down as unfriendly must needs "taste" and exchange "the compliments of the season," "A guid New Year to you!" "And the same to you, and wishing you many o' them!" The last observant of the custom that I remember was an old man of well-nigh eighty years, who, long after it had ceased and determined so far as the community generally was concerned, through the force of habit still was first-foot in the houses of his nearest neighbours. When he died, "First-fittin'" died with him in my native parish.

But do not suppose that the observance of New Year's Day in Scotland was bound up with drinking. Far from it. Even in my boyhood I can remember little excess, whilst the tone of so ciety on this subject has been rising ever since. Drinking bouts date