

The Church.

THEREFORE I WILL NOT BE NEGLIGENT TO PUT YOU ALWAYS IN REMEMBRANCE OF THESE THINGS, THOUGH YE KNOW THEM AND BE ESTABLISHED IN THE PRESENT TRUTH.—2 PETER, I, 12.

VOL. I.]

COBOURG, U. C., SATURDAY, DECEMBER 23, 1837.

[NO. XXVIII.]

Poetry.

HYMN FOR CHRISTMAS-DAY.

O Saviour, whom this holy morn
Gave to our world below;
To mortal want and labour born,
And more than mortal woe!

Incarnate Word! by every grief,
By each temptation tried,
Who lived to yield our ills relief,
And to redeem us died!

If gaily clothed and proudly fed,
In dangerous wealth we dwell;
Remind us of Thy manger-bed,
And lowly cottage-cell!

If prest by poverty severe,
In envious want we pine,
Oh! may the Spirit whisper near,
How poor a lot was thine!

Through fickle fortune's various scene
From sin preserve us free!
Like as Thou hast a mourner been,
May we rejoice with thee!

Bishop Heber.

THE ENGLISH LAYMAN.

No. VII.

CHRISTMAS.

And well our Christian sires of old
Loved when the year its course had roll'd,
And brought blithe Christmas back again,
With all his hospitable train,
Domestic and religious rite
Gave honour to the holy night:
On Christmas eve the bells were rung;
On Christmas eve the mass was sung.

England was merry England, when
Old Christmas brought his sports again.
'Twas Christmas broach'd the mightiest ale;
'Twas Christmas told the merriest tale:
A Christmas gambol oft could cheer
The poor man's heart through half the year.

Sir Walter Scott.

Festivals, in commemoration of national blessings and deliverances, have flowed alike from the ordinance of the Almighty, and from the natural instinct of man to commingle the gratification of the senses which his Maker has implanted in him, with the rejoicings of a gladdened heart. Under the Jewish polity almost every important occurrence in the history of God's chosen people was perpetuated in their remembrance by an annually recurring feast; and when their idolatrous abominations had provoked the wrathful denunciations of the prophets, those inspired monitors were commissioned to proclaim that, among other visitations of his displeasure, Jehovah would cause their "mirth to cease, and all their solemn feasts." When our Saviour came to fulfil the law, he scrupulously observed these Mosaic institutions, because their continuance was in no ways opposed to the propagation of his Gospel, but, on the contrary, tended to soften the hearts of the perverse Jews by recalling the mercies shewn unto their forefathers, and thus rendered them more susceptible of the influence of a purer dispensation. Besides the participation of our Saviour in these legal ceremonials, we find him, on several occasions, encouraging by his presence an indulgence in innocent festivity. His first miracle was wrought at a wedding-banquet, and contributed to the social enjoyment of the guests. When Matthew, (Levi) shortly after his becoming a follower of our Lord, made "a great feast" in his own house, Jesus honoured it by his attendance; and far from disdaining to eat and drink with publicans and sinners, took advantage of the occasion to pour a lesson of wisdom into the ears of those, who, but for this opportunity, might never have been privileged to hear his voice. In one of his parables, also, the kingdom of Heaven is likened unto a supper made by a great man, and there is not a single act in our Saviour's ministry, or a single word recorded as having fallen from his lips, which can be construed into a prohibition of the temperate enjoyment of the creatures and fruits over which God has given man dominion, or which represses that impulse of the human heart, which leads us, when a temporal blessing is vouchsafed to us, to bring forth the best robe, to kill the fatted calf, and to eat, and be merry.

It cannot, therefore, be reasonably doubted that, in the very earliest ages of the church, the Christians were in the habit of solemnizing so joyful and important an event, as the nativity of our blessed Saviour. The commencement of the custom is lost amid the mist and obscurity of time, but we have distinct allusion to it in the second century, and some even assert that traces of it may be found in the reign of the Emperor Antoninus Pius, who died in 161, after a sway of 23 years. In the reign of Dioclesian (A. D. 283—304) the observance of the day receives melancholy proof from the massacre of the Christians at Nicomedia, who, while celebrating the Nativity, were by the tyrant's orders confined within the church in which they had assembled for worship, and inhumanly burned to death. As we approach nearer to modern times, evidences of the observance of the Nativity, as a Christian festival, thicken upon us. In the fourth century it was the custom of pious persons to date any remarkable event from the festival of the Incarnation; in 741, it was adopted as the epoch from which Christians should date, rather than from the Pagan epoch of the building of Rome; its observance was enjoined by the Anglo-Saxon church, the eighteenth

of King Alfred's laws allowing twelve days holidays at Christmas; and in 1431, Pope Eugenius rendered its adoption obligatory in all christian countries. The Waldenses,—that pious remnant who fed the pure flame of Christianity when Rome had nearly extinguished it,—have solemnized the day from time immemorial, and so also have the Greek, the Swedish, and the Lutheran churches. At the period of the Reformation in England, when an innumerable swarm of saints was dislodged from the Calendar, the principal festivals of the church, and among them the Nativity, were judiciously retained, and sanctioned by Parliamentary enactment. From the churches disciplined after the Calvinistic model, the solemnization of all Festivals is entirely excluded, though it appears that there were some, of which Christmas was one, that Calvin himself would willingly have retained. Neither do the Quakers pay any respect to this or any other anniversary of the Christian Church.

The simple festivity, combined with religious services, with which this day was first celebrated by the primitive christians, was soon exchanged, in the general corruption of manners that ensued, for boisterous revelry, and gorgeous superstitions and pageants. The Roman Saturnalia, called December Liberties, were held at the close of the year, and when Christianity and Paganism clashed in close conflict with each other with forces almost equally balanced, the Clergy strove to gain the ascendancy by converting those superstitions they could not eradicate, into auxiliaries to their cause. Thus unhappily disregarding the means, and looking only to the end, they engrafted the licentious rites of polytheism upon the customs of the church, and sullied the purity of the Christian worship by an introduction of grotesque mummeries and profane amusements, very evident vestiges of which are still to be met with in all Roman Catholic countries. At the season of Christmas the churches were converted into theatres, and dramatic representations of Scripture history called *Mysteries*, were enacted by the priests and their pupils. Even when the revival of the long-buried Truth had banished most of the Popish innovations and superstitions, "remnants of the old time" lingered in the manners and amusements of the people. Religious plays, and costly masques on a scale of magnificence almost incredible, were still enacted before the court at Christmas, and would probably have stood their ground much longer, had not the stormy times of the first Charles overshadowed the land with gloom, and, amid strife, confiscation and bloodshed, left little space for the display of pageantries, and the observance of ancient customs.

A violent reaction then took place, and the reformation, or rather the indiscriminate subversion, that followed the outbreak of civil war, was considered incomplete, until the axe of change had been laid to the root of the most insignificant and harmless custom, as well as of the most vital principle of the Constitution. Mince-pies, then made long in the shape, and in imitation (so says the learned Selden) of the cratch, or cradle, in which the new-born Saviour was laid, were pronounced abominations not to be tolerated, and Christmas, with all its time-honoured festivities, with all its endearing interchanges of Christian fellowship, and its temporary forgetfulness of earthly distinctions in one promiscuous scene of happiness, was robbed of its honours by the gloomy Puritans. In their stern and morose bosoms the Poet's noble saying that "what is grey with age becomes religion," found no responsive echo, and England, once merry England, emancipated from the "Egyptian bondage of Holydays," was merry no more.

In the year 1644, Christmas Day happening to fall on the day appointed by Parliament for the monthly fast, it was resolved, after some discussion by the commons, that the festival should be merged in the fast. Calamy, the eminent nonconformist divine, who, some years before, had left his sick bed on this solemn anniversary, and declared from the pulpit "that he thought himself bound in conscience to preach that day, lest the stones of the street should cry out against him,"—now launched out into the severest censure of "the superstition and profaneness" of this day, which he affirmed to be so rooted into it, that there was no way to reform it, but by dealing with it as Hezekiah did with the brazen serpent. A curious Parliamentary debate, which took place about this time, has been preserved by Burton, a Puritan chronicler, and introduces us into the very presence of that revolutionary assembly, which, as well as its French successor and imitator of 1789, though starting from very different principles, sought to metamorphose the moral and social framework of the nation, by "laying irreverent hands" upon those cherished hereditary customs which time had consecrated, and interwoven into the "people's pious nursery faith." The debate is but short, and I will therefore introduce it:—"Colonel Matthew observed, 'The House is thin, much, I believe, occasioned by the observation of this day. I have a short bill to prevent the superstition for the future.' 'I could get no rest all night,' said Mr. Robinson, 'for the preparation of this foolish day's solemnity. This renders us in the eyes of the people to be profane. We are, I doubt, returning to Popery.' 'It is a very good time, (said Sir W. Strickland) to offer the bill this day, to bear your testimony against it, since the people observe it with more solemnity than they do the Lord's day.' Major General Packe remarked, 'if ever bill was well timed, this is. You see how the people keep up these superstitious observances to your face. One may pass from the Tower to Westminster, and not a shop open, nor a creature stirring.'—The Bill accordingly passed into an ordinance, and the people of England were no longer permitted

To hail with uncontrol'd delight,
And general voice, the happy night
That to the cottage, as the crown,
Brought tidings of salvation down.

But the heart of England was still sound and loyal at the core, and the national cheerfulness, dimmed and tarnished as it was by civil bloodshed, rose up in resistance to this Puritanic invasion of the good old customs. Some of the Established clergy read the Liturgy, and prayed publicly for the bishops, and even *many Presbyterian ministers preached*. The shops were generally shut, while many tradesmen who kept theirs open, were abused by the populace. When an attempt was made to enforce obedience to the obnoxious ordinance, riots and insurrections occurred in several places. "At Canterbury, the Mayor, endeavouring to keep the peace had his head broken, and was dragged about the streets; the mob broke into divers houses of the most religious in the town, broke their windows, abused their persons, and threw their goods into the streets, because they exposed them to sale on Christmas Day."

After the murder of the King had cast its darkness over the whole land, the austere genius of Independency at last succeeded in stripping Father Christmas of his legitimate and long-worn honours. The churches were closed by public authority, and the steadfast sons of the Establishment, who clung to her the more affectionately in her adversity, performed "the devotions of that blessed day with their family at home," there being "penalties on observers" of the public offices of the Church. Undeterred, however, by Cromwell's edict of 1655, Episcopalians were still found who gathered together on Christmas Day, and Evelyn, that model of a Christian gentleman, has left on record, a lively account of a scene that occurred on one of these occasions:—"25th December, 1657. I went to London with my wife, to celebrate Christmas-day, Mr. Gunning preaching in Exeter Chapel, on Micah 7, v. 2. Sermon ended, as he was giving us the Holy Sacrament, the chapel was surrounded with soldiers, and all the communicants and assembly surprised and kept prisoners by them, some in the house, others carried away. It fell to my share to be confined to a room in the house, where yet I was permitted to dine with the master of it, the Countess of Dorset, Lady Hatton, and some others of quality who invited me. In the afternoon came Colonel Whaley, Goffe, and others from Whitehall to examine us one by one; some they committed to the Marshal, some to prison. When I came before them, they took my name and abode, examined me why, contrary to an ordinance made that none should any longer observe the superstitious time of the Nativity (so esteemed by them,) I durst offend, and particularly be at common prayers, which they told me was but the Mass in English, and particularly pray for Charles Stewart, for which we had no Scripture. I told them we did not pray for Charles Stewart, but for all Christian Kings, Princes, and Governors. They replied, in so doing we prayed for the King of Spain too, who was their enemy and a papist, with other frivolous and ensnaring questions and much threatening; and finding no colour to detain me, they dismissed me with much pity of my ignorance. These were men of high flight and above ordinances, and spake spiteful things of our Lord's Nativity. As we went up to receive the Sacrament the miscreants held their muskets against us as if they would have shot us at the altar, but yet suffering us to finish the office of Communion, as perhaps not having instructions what to do in case they found us in that action. So I got home late the next day, blessed be God."

At the Restoration, old Father Christmas,—so long proscribed as a Royalist and a Malignant,—was reinstated in all his honours, and has never since been exiled from his favourite Isle. I am afraid that during the profligate reign of Charles II. the day was equally dishonoured at court with every other in the calendar, and was only pre-eminent over other festivals by being disgraced with a greater degree "of inexpressible luxury, profaneness, gaming, and all dissoluteness, and total forgetfulness of God." Time, however, and the greater purity of public morals has corrected this evil throughout all classes of society; and excesses, incidental to the general manners of a by-gone age, rather than to the celebration of the Festival itself, no longer mar the decent mirth of our winter holydays; while the grave and sombre livery that Christmas wears in these our own days, so utilitarian and so unpoetical, would scarcely offend the severe eye of even Calamy himself. Washington Irving, a son of the new world, but whose genius never shone with its full lustre until kindled by "the traditionary customs of golden-hearted antiquity,"—even he, with a feeling rarely found in a phlegmatic American, has sighed over "the havoc that modern refinement has made among the hearty old holiday customs," and with a sweet and chastened humour, a pathos, an elegance, and a kindly warmth, that Addison or Goldsmith alone can equal, has touched admiringly upon the most beautiful points of the sterling old-fashioned English character, when seen by the light of a Christmas fireside. I will conclude this article, which throughout is but little more than a compilation, with two quotations of exquisite beauty, both in point of sentiment and language: the author whose praises I have so feebly echoed supplies the one, — a popular writer of our own communion,* the other:—

"Of all the old festivals, that of Christmas awakens the strongest and most heartfelt associations. There is a tone of solemn and sacred feeling that blends with our conviviality, and lifts the spirit to a state of hallowed and elevated enjoyment. The services of the Church about this season are extremely tender and inspiring. They dwell on the beautiful story of the origin of our faith, and the pastoral scenes that accompanied its announcement. They gradually increase in fervour and pathos during the season of Advent, until they break forth in full Ju-

* Horace Smith, in his work on Festivals, Games, &c.