



The Kingdom of Christmas

BY LEWIS MILLIGAN.

THERE is no festival or season in the whole year more dear to the heart of the Englishman than the merry time of Yule. What floods of recollections surge upon the minds and hearts of those who spend their first Christmas in a strange land! From their earliest years they have kept their feast of good-will and jollity, and the sweetest associations of their home lives cluster around this happy season.

Memory can be a great blessing; it can be a source of deep sorrow. It largely depends upon ourselves which way the reflection on the past affects us. The great mistake is in thinking of life as only existing behind; life is threefold: past, present and future—these three, and the greatest of these is the future!

That is the key to which the song of Eternity is set, and that shall be the key in which I shall sing of Christmas of long ago. Long ago? What are ten, twenty, thirty, or even seventy years to the soul that has the vision of Eternal Life? Those happy times are as near and dear to us as ever they were,—aye, nearer and dearer!

I can at all times now go out a' carolling; every night I can hang my stocking upon the bed-post and chuckle beneath the warm sheets as I hear muffled foot-falls, now on the stairs, now the landing, now on the room floor,—now fumbling and heavily breathing in the darkness—then a reversal of these strange movements followed by a long-drawn sigh of silence—sleep.

"Christians, awake! Salute the happy morn!"

How many times have I heard that song swell out on the frosty air and tingle to the stars, till one could almost believe he was listening to the angelic host that sang to the dreaming shepherds in the quiet vales of old Palestine!

"Peace on earth and mercy mild,
God and sinners reconciled."

It is indeed the same song, and the voices are the echoes of those celestial voices. May this chain of echoes never be broken; let each year, each generation take up this strain right down the ages. Till time be no more, and this fragment be linked again to that everlasting song which encircles the radiant throne.

There is nothing which brings earth nearer to heaven and which gives so sweet a sense of the divine mystery of even common things than the simple observance of this anniversary of the nativity of the world's Redeemer.

This is essentially the children's festival; there is no place in the party for crabbed age. Who ever thought of Father Christmas as an old man? We all know that he is none other than Peter Pan in disguise,—for have we not found his wig and whiskers lying about on the mantelpiece after his departure?

What a hustle and bustle there is in the market place! how gay are the store windows! and what mean these eager,

happy faces? this ebb and flow of wide-eyed children, straining with unbounded wonder and expectation toward the grottoes,—strutting with armfuls triumphantly homeward? What! do you not know this is Christmas-tide—Children's tide?

The wind blows cold
Across the world,
All dumb is nature's choir;
But we shall sing
The songs of spring
Around the Christmas fire!

A flood of light comes out into the darkness, and with it the lit of children's laughter!

"Come in! come in!"
There is a stamping, knocking and shuffling of feet, and then a taking off of caps, capes and overcoats, a shaking of hands, a choosing of seats, a chatter of questions, a poking of the fire, a clatter of dishes, and, lo! here we are again!
What rubbish these men do talk over the table! "Don't be silly, George; hand round the seed-cake!"

George is a child of thirty-six, and although he is a very serious Methodist, and can talk sublimely about the "Book of Job," and revel in the Psalms of David, he seems to forget all that when he comes to the first chapter of Matthew!

Life is a very serious business, no doubt, but not when you are a child; and at Christmas we all suddenly remember we are merely over-grown children. We seem to shed all the accretions of time, and like an old ship whose sides have been cleaned of barnacles, we skim along the blue sea of life as free and gay as when we were first launched.

Ha! ha! ho! ho!

And away we go!

The frost may freeze and the wind may blow,

But our craft rides fair

On a bounding main,
And we soon shall be in port again!

This is perhaps one of the most drunken essays that was ever written upon Christmas. But this is an intoxicating theme. I don't wonder at Dickens writing those delightful pictures of Christmas which are strewn throughout his stories; and I don't wonder that Pickwick, the venerable child did bang his hat upon the floor and triumphantly stamp upon it!

I pause here to look up that incident in *Pickwick Papers*, and I find that although the venerable child did bang his hat upon the floor, he did not actually stamp upon it, according to Dickens' account of what happened. Where I got the idea of stamping upon the hat from I do not know; but, it seemed to me a fitting climax to the incident; and Dickens is so much less an artist for omitting this final act of utter abandon and determination to smash all convention and decorum! I find, also, that this incident did not occur at Christmas time, but at a drinking party.

Dickens has often been criticized for basing his fun upon drunkenness. But it must be remembered that Dickens was not

a realist. Pickwick, like Hamlet, is not a real-chole man. As there is a Hamlet in each one of us, so there is a Pickwick—a Falstaff, too.

This Pickwick needs not the stimulation of wine to awaken him; one draught of pure childishness is the most intoxicating of all beverages, and I have seen aged persons hopelessly drunk on such liquor; "Blind to the world!" as they say in toper language. Yes, let us all be blind to the world at this joyous season. If Mr. Carnegie were only to indulge in a glass of real, old Christmas Hale, he would become so drunk as to impoverish himself within twenty-four hours. And if all the world were to take a drink, what a glorious Party of a world we should have! We would all be cracking one another's valises, sharing one another's oranges, laughing at each other's jokes, singing the silliest and sweetest of songs, and every one would forget his cares, for the world would be young again.

Dickens would be the last man to defend drinking, and perhaps the first to condemn it; for he must have seen the wretchedness and degradation which resulted from this habit among the poor of London. He used wine as a symbol, and not as real liquor. Drunkenness as it is represented at the "Dingy Dell" party, is not real drunkenness. If you want a picture of the real sort of drunkenness, of the sort of John Massell in that horrible poem in a recent number of *The English Review*. The intoxication of the "Dingy Dell" party was none other than those high spirits which possess us on such occasions. The real drunkard is the man who evokes these spirits artificially, who is perpetually trying to drown the Hamlet in him; as if a man might cut off his head in spite of his heart!

Let us be serious when the occasion demands it, and when the feast is spread, and the Master turns life's water into wine, let us drink it and be merry over the miracle!

"The fiddles and harp began in real earnest. Away went Mr. Pickwick—hands across—down the middle to the very end of the room, and half-way up the chimney, back again to the door—poussette everywhere—loud stamp on the ground—ready for the next couple—again—loud stamp to beat out the time—next couple, and the next, and the next again—never was such going! At last, after they had reached the bottom of the dance, and full fourteen couple after the old lady had retired in an exhausted state, and the clergyman's wife had been substituted in her stead, what gentleman, when there was no demand whatever on his exertions, keep perpetually dancing in his place, to keep time to the music: smiling on his partner all the while with a blandness of demeanor which baffles all description."

John Wesley declared that the devil should not have all the good music; he should not have all the dancing either! I once heard a Salvationist, who was notorious for the hilarity of his religion, declare at a street corner that he once used to dance for the devil, and was not now ashamed to dance to the glory of God!