

Miscellaneous.

A LONG RIDE BY RAIL.—Dr. David Gill, the astronomer, wanted to impress on the minds of some young hearers the wonderful distance of the fixed stars from this little earth, and in a recent lecture he related the following imaginary anecdote:—

A railroad was built from the earth to Centauri. A man boarded the tram, and, upon taking his seat, he casually asked the conductor:—

"At what rate do we travel?"

"Sixty miles an hour."

"Humph! a mile a minute; then when shall we reach Centauri?"

"In 48,663,000 years, sir."

"Rather a long journey," said the passenger, as he settled back in his seat and unfolded his morning paper.

THE CHRISTMAS SHEAF.

Norwegians have a very pretty, yet curious Christmas custom, in their own country. A pole is fastened up over the door of the barns at the farm-houses, and on the top is tied a little sheaf of wheat.

A traveller was for a long time puzzled to understand what it could mean. Was it for ornament? That could hardly be; it was no great improvement to the roof. Was it a specimen of what the barn contained? That did not seem likely as it did not concern strangers to know what was in the barn, and those who lived there knew already. Was it a rude kind of sign to show that entertainment for man and beast might be had there? No; it did not appear only at such houses; and sometimes the farm house that served as an inn had no sheaf.

This traveller did not know the language well enough to understand the answers of the peasants, when he asked them about the sheaf; so he had made up his mind that the little sheaf of wheat must be an offering set on for Nigel, or one of the spirits of wind, water, or storm, in whom the peasant of Norway more than half believed. But he was wrong.

One day he fell in with a kind old Norwegian gentleman who stopped at the same farm-house, and who spoke English. He asked him the meaning of those mysterious sheaves of wheat.

The Norwegian gentleman laughed heartily at the traveller's guesses, and then told him that the mysterious little sheaves were put on a Christmas tree, every year, "that the birds might have a merry Christmas."

This is surely a very pretty custom, and shows that the people who live in that far away, cold country have very warm and tender hearts.—*Children's Guide*.

HOW SPONGES ARE CAUGHT.

The sponging fleet is composed of small schooners ranging from ten to forty tons, or even smaller. Each schooner carries from four to six men, and makes periodical trips out to the sponge beds. Around Abaco, Andros Island, and Exuma, are some of the principal fisheries; there are hardly any of value in the immediate vicinity of Nassau. The men do not dive for them, as sponge fishers in the Mediterranean do, but use long-handled things like oyster-tongs to fish them out of the water. They do not go it blind, and probe in the mud like oystermen; in this clear water they can see every inch of the bottom, make up their mind what sponges to take, and seize hold of each one carefully, detach it from the rock to which it clings, and lift it into the boat. They are not the nice, delicate and light-colored things we see in shop windows.

When first taken from the water they look and feel more like a piece of raw liver than anything else. They are slippery, shiny, ugly and smell bad. Their color is generally a sort of brown, very much like the color of gulf weed, only a little darker. Most people are taught, in the days of their freshness and innocence, that the sponge is an animal, and when they visit Nassau they expect perhaps to see sponges swimming about the harbor, if, indeed, they do not surprise some of the more athletic ones climbing trees or making little excursions over the hills. But they are disappointed when they learn that the animal part disappears entirely long before the sponge reaches a market, and that the part we use for mopping up fluids is only his house, the many-roomed residence in which he sheltered himself while at sea—a regular marine teno-

ment house, built with great skill and architectural precision, in which many of the little beasts lived and died. After the sponges reach the deck of the vessel they are cleaned and dried, and go through a curing process. They then become the sponges of commerce, and are divided into eight varieties in the Bahamas.

Some, called "lambswool," or "sheepswool," are as fine and soft as silk, and very strong. Others, although large and perhaps tough, are coarse and comparatively worthless. There are, too, bouquet sponges, silk sponges, wire sponges, and finger and glove sponges. The process for curing them is to keep them on deck for two or three days, which "kill" them. Then they are put in a crawl and kept there from eight to ten days, and are afterward cleaned and bleached in the sun on the beach. When they reach Nassau the roots are cut off, and the sponges are trimmed and dressed for exportation. Nearly every dakey in Nassau understands how to do this trimming part. The symmetry of the sponge must be preserved as much as possible, and if there are any places where coral sand has adhered to the sponge, those places must be cut out, for no amount of skill or care will get rid of sand in a sponge, and the sand is sure to scratch anything it touches. The trimming is generally done very expertly, so that a novice would hardly see that a sponge had been cut.—*New York Times*.

THE INFIDEL AND HIS DAUGHTER.

Suggested by reading a newspaper paragraph describing the scene between Ethan Allen and his daughter, on the eve of her death, when she asked the stern infidel in whose faith he would have her die—his or her mother's.

"The damps of death are coming fast,
My father, o'er my brow;
The past with all its scenes have fled,
And I must turn me now
To that dim future which in vain
My feeble eyes descry;
Tell me, my father, in this hour,
In whose stern faith to die.

"In thine? I've watched the scornful smile,
And heard thy withering tone,
When e'er the Christian's humble hope
Was placed above thine own;
I've heard thee speak of coming death
Without a shade of gloom,
And laugh at all the childish fears
That cluster round the tomb.

"Or is it my mother's faith?
How fondly do I trace,
Through many a weary year long past,
That calm and saintly face!
How often do I call to mind,
Now she is 'neath the sod,
The place, the hour, in which she drew
My early thoughts to God!

"'Twas then she took this sacred book,
And from its burning page,
Read how its truths support the soul
In youth and falling age!
And bade me in its precepts live,
And by its precepts die,
That I might share a home of love
In world's beyond the sky.

"My father, shall I look above,
Amid this gathering gloom;
To Him whose promises of love
Extend beyond the tomb?
Or curse the being who has blessed
This checkered path of mine?
And promises eternal rest?
Or die, my sire, in thine?"

The frown upon that warrior brow
Passed like a cloud away,
And tears coursed down the rugged cheek
That flowed not till that day.

"Not—not in mine," with choking voice,

The skeptic made reply—

"But in thy mother's holy faith,
My daughter, may'st thou die!"