

CHRISTMAS AT COURT.

By the HON. MRS. H. ARMYTAGE.



RIGHT royal Christmas" is a traditional expression very often put into the mouths of Englishmen, and yet when seeking materials on which to write an interesting paper under this heading, we find that at the present time there is not very much to relate respecting any special Court festivities at Christmastide. From the date of the Norman conquest we have records of the great feasting of our former sovereigns and their Court on each recurring season. The Norman kings held these feasts at York, at Gloucester, or at Windsor. William I. chose Christmas Day for his coronation. Richard Cœur de Lion once kept the feast with all his Court at Sicily. Edward I. is mentioned in history as being at Bristol among other places on a Christmas Day. In 1343 Edward III. renewed the famous tradition of the Knights of the Round Table, and instituted the Order of the Garter with great magnificence and unlimited feasting at Christmas. Henry V., during the lengthy siege of Rouen, would not let the day pass unheeded, but ceased hostilities and made it known by heralds that all of the enemy's force who would come to the English camp should be well fed at his expense. And again at the siege of Orleans a cessation of hostilities was requested that the day might be devoted to merriment and pleasure. A curious edict, dated 1461, forbid all dicing or playing at cards among the people except at Christmas. Henry VII. and VIII. both held splendid festivities during their respective reigns; neither did Queen Elizabeth fall short of them when she was on the throne, and the very serious tax of New Year's gifts is recorded in old documents which are most interesting. On the 1st January an usher knocked at the King's door (Henry VII.) and announced "A New Year's gift from the Queen." The messenger being admitted received the regulated number of marks for bringing Her Majesty's present. He was quickly followed by others, carrying gifts from all who would stand well in Royal favour, and to each a suitable payment was made from the King's exchequer. The catalogue of these gifts is extraordinary.

A purse containing gold was often given; valuable jewels and rare ornaments, while personal garments were not unfrequently presented. "A richly embroidered smock" to Queen Mary, and other articles of apparel, are noticed.

In return it appears that the sovereign made presents to his suite and others, and no doubt some of the gifts received by himself were passed on to others, as in one catalogue it is said a gilt cap given to His Majesty was presented to one of the courtiers.

There came a day in 1652 when, under the rigid rule of Puritanism, it was prohibited to commemorate the Holy Day of the Lord's Nativity in any manner; but with the restoration of Charles II. the Court broke out into the wildest amusements at Christmas as well as other times, masques and mummings, &c., having full swing.

There are now but few traces of the old English Christmas customs in any Royal gatherings. The wassail bowl is never served, and the splendid baron of beef which is always supplied to Her Majesty's table is

almost the only special adornment of her Christmas board.

It is not many years since a very curious mess was served up at St. James's Palace to the Queen's chaplains. It was known as plum porridge, and from all accounts must have borne a strong resemblance to the original French idea of an English plum pudding.

It was always the duty of the poet laureate to compose an ode on the 1st of January, but the rule is not now enforced.

In Her Majesty's household, wherever she may be residing, the day is not observed in any special manner, nor have there been any very great Christmas festivities at Windsor Castle during her reign. The poor in all the parishes where Her Majesty has a Royal residence receive large gifts of clothing and of provisions. At Windsor this is always laid out in the large riding school, and the recipients assemble there on the day of distribution.

At Whippingham, in the Isle of Wight, the same is provided, and of late years the Court have generally passed the season at Osborne, so that Her Majesty takes a personal interest in the dole there given; but until the death of the Prince Consort, the Queen and Royal Family were generally present at the riding school at Windsor when the poor people assembled. At one time Her Majesty and the Prince were in the habit of having dramatic performances at Windsor Castle, and they generally took place at Christmas. Some additional guests were always included in the Royal dinner party on Christmas Day.

The German custom of Christmas trees on New Year's Eve or Day was certainly introduced, and though now it has been so extensively adopted in England as to have become almost an English custom, for many years it was seen in very few houses beyond the Court. Queen Victoria and her family keep the custom on New Year's Eve. A large tree, covered with lights and presents, is prepared for the servants of the Royal household, and the Queen herself distributes the gifts which surround the tree to each individual.

The ladies and gentlemen of the household are equally remembered, and receive a New Year's gift. In 1841 the Queen in her diary alludes to the dance given at Windsor, and that according to the German custom, as the clock struck twelve a flourish of trumpets sounded. Such family gatherings, with the addition of various members of the Royal household, and some chosen guests staying in the castle, have been the only festivities of the season.

T.R.H. the Prince and Princess of Wales since their marriage have generally spent their Christmas at Sandringham with their children and other guests. Seasonable gifts to the poor on the estate, with good cheer to all, are distributed as at Windsor in presence of the Prince and Princess and their family.

Within the last few years many of the minor commemorations of the season at Court have been done away with. Formerly all officials at any of the Royal offices received certain gifts. Mince pies of gigantic size, game, &c., were allotted to their use, but are so no longer.



VARIETIES.

THE BEST WOMEN.—The best women are indeed necessarily the most difficult to know; they are recognised chiefly in the happiness of their husbands and the nobleness of their children: they are only to be divined, not discerned, by the stranger.—*Ruskin.*

IN DIFFICULTY.—When things will not suit our will, it is wise to suit our will to things.—*Arabic Proverb.*

TRUE HAPPINESS.

True happiness is to no place confined,
But still is found with a contented mind.

SOUND AND SENSE.—The Persians say of noisy, unreasonable talk, "I hear the sound of the mill-stone, but I see no meal."

HOW TO MANAGE A HUSBAND.—A lady was asked to reveal the secret by which she had always preserved the attention and affection of her husband. "It is," answered she, "in doing everything that pleases him, and by bearing patiently everything that does not please me."

BASE INGRATITUDE.—Ingratitude is the abridgment of all baseness—a fault never found unattended with other viciousness.—*Fuller.*

FOR THE MUSICAL.—Music is the only sensual gratification which mankind may indulge in to excess without injury to their moral or religious feelings.—*Addison.*

THE CHANGES OF THE KALEIDOSCOPE.

The number of changes of which the kaleidoscope will admit are amazing. Some idea of them may be got from the following curious calculation:—

Supposing the instrument to contain twenty small pieces of glass, &c., and that you make ten changes in each minute, it will take the inconceivable space of 462,880,899,576 years and 360 days to go through the immense variety of changes it is capable of producing; amounting (according to our frail ideas of the nature of things) to an eternity.

Or if you take only twelve small pieces, and make ten changes in each minute, it will then take 33,264 days, or 91 years and 49 days to exhaust the possible variations. However exaggerated these statements may appear to some, they are actually the case.

OLD AND YOUNG.—An ignoramus was ridiculing a learned man on his great age. "An ass," replied the learned man, "is older at twenty than a man at sixty."

HOW TO GROW MORE BEAUTIFUL.—We are told by jewellers that there is no diamond of so fine a water but it requires some aid to improve its lustre. This observation has been also applied to young women, and no objections can be made thereto, provided it be understood in a fitting and healthy sense.

A CONTENTED MIND.—All people have their trials and afflictions, but a contented mind accommodates itself to every vicissitude of life; neither poverty nor distress, neither losses nor disappointments, neither sickness nor sorrow, can effect its equanimity.—*Dr. Brewer.*

WITHOUT LOVE.—A crowd is not company, and faces are but a gallery of pictures, and talk but a tinkling cymbal where there is no love.—*Bacon.*