



POPULAR CHRISTMAS FESTIVITIES IN NAPLES.

By the middle of December preparations for Christmas are in full swing. The streets are all animation, and one meets with hurry, jostling and noise wherever one goes. Too often also the ear is pained by the pitiful bleating of poor little lambs as they are carried to their fate. In many of the by-streets vehicles of all descriptions, paniered donkeys, half hidden by artistically arranged loads of fruit or vegetables, throng the thoroughfare, and gaily-dressed country-women, usually squatting on the ground, may be seen in picturesque groups behind their baskets of eggs, in the midst of a nondescript crowd of persons hurrying to and fro, many of them carrying the usual Christmas presents made by clients to their doctors and lawyers. These presents consist principally of lambs, kids, capons, and coffee and sugar, the weight of sugar being always double that of the coffee.

The shops too are already dressed, but the only ones worthy of notice are the fruit and cake shops and the buttermen's. The first-named, besides their piles of fruit arranged in various ways and ornamented with flowers and greenery, generally display inscriptions and designs formed of dried fruit, figs, raisins, etc. The windows of the cake shops exhibit wonderful structures in *struffoli* in the shape of castles, houses and churches. These *struffoli* are one of the special Christmas sweets. They are made of a stiff paste of eggs and flour cut into small round pieces, and delicately fried in oil. When cooked they are tastefully arranged on a dish, and sprinkled over with honey and tiny coloured comfits. But most surprising of all is the buttermen's display, for his window generally contains the figure of a man all complete, with hat, collar, shirt, jacket, trousers, and even boots, made of dried sausages and bacon fat and rind.

A week before Christmas, along both sides of the principal street in Naples, the Toledo or Via Roma, to give it its modern but by the Neapolitans little used name, the *bancherelli* are put up. These *bancherelli* are stalls for the sale of toys, glass and china, books, brushes, and all sorts of small articles. In the two squares, "Piazza Dante" and "Piazza della Carita," a great display of baskets and tin-ware is always to be seen. Here and there an aged peasant in his old-fashioned costume has an old sack or piece of cloth spread on the pavement before him, upon which he has set out his wares, evidently of his own manufacture; spoons, egg-cups, whistles, and a few other trifles, all made of wood. Of course, in fine weather the scene is gay and cheerful enough, but when the season is wet and cold (and rain nearly always does set in as soon as the *bancherelli* are put up) the scene presented by the covered stalls and the unfortunate vendors, often consisting of whole families, crouching under the poor shelter or huddling together round a pan of kindled charcoal for warmth and comfort, is disconsolate in the extreme.

On the ninth day before Christmas the *Novena* begins, that is to say, a nine days devotion to the child Jesus. It consists of the recital, on those nine consecutive days, of an invitation to shepherds to join in visiting and

adoring the newborn Babe, to the accompaniment of bagpipes and flageolet. Very often, however, the words are omitted, only the music being executed by the *zampognatori* or bagpipe players, such as one occasionally sees in England.

They are shepherds still wearing their ancient costumes, who come up to Naples yearly for this purpose, sometimes from great distances, and have to live all the year on the gains of these few days. The sum they carry home may amount to four or five pounds, each *Novena* being paid for at the rate of from half a franc to five francs, according to the purse and the inclination of the devotee. Besides the money, the *zampognatori* take back with them a small provision of Christmas fruits, cakes and liquor, for the reception of which they always carry a big bag and a wooden bottle.

Both in private houses and in churches the *Novena* is performed either before a picture or a little figure in wood, wax, or chalk, of the infant Jesus; and this little figure may be alone or it may form the central point of a *presepe* (manger). These *presepi* may be described as a species of *tableaux vivants*, representing more or less fancifully and on a more or less elaborate scale, by means of a cork background and figures of persons and animals, the birth of the Holy Child, and the incidents attendant on it. These figures are known by the generic name of *pastori* (shepherds). They are either carved in wood or moulded in stucco, and many of them are of such beautiful workmanship—real works of art. The finest of all is the one in the museum of San Martino. The whole is so arranged as to represent rustic scenery, generally including some ancient ruin, and the centre of every *presepe* is, of course, the grotto or stable of Bethlehem, and the holy family with the ox and the ass. Immediately in front are generally placed some *zampognatori*, and the wise men of the east in posture of adoration. A shepherd with his dog, asleep under a thatched hut, while his sheep are grazing around, must not be left out, nor the inn with its array of eatables, macaroni, ham (eaten raw with fresh figs), and fruit. In a well-got-up *presepe* a lake, stream, or fountain, contrived out of pieces of looking-glass, is essential, while scattered here and there are single figures or groups, all wending their way to the manger in which the Holy Babe lies. There is the woman on a donkey with her baby in her arms and her husband following, carrying their offering of eggs, poultry, etc. There is the turbaned Moor with his tray of precious coins, a tribute from his master. There is the Eastern prince on horse-back, his dress sparkling with jewels, and his retinue of servants and camels, all laden with presents for the Holy Child. Above the grotto shines the star of the East; groups of angels hover about in the air, and so on, according as the *presepe* properties (if I may be allowed the term) permit. Few, of course, are the very extensive *presepi* got up every year, and the minor ones are gradually being replaced by the Christmas-tree, whilst in many families a combination of both is found, a diminutive *presepe* being arranged round the base of the tree.

On the evening before Christmas Eve it is

usual to pay a visit to "Via Santa Brigada," one of the finest streets in the town, which, on this occasion, becomes a perfect fish-market. The scene presented there is thoroughly Neapolitan and most picturesque, with its stalls and baskets of various kinds of fish, conspicuous amongst which is the Christmas *capitone* or large eel garnished with green sea-weed, and lit up with innumerable little lamps, while the vendors, often dressed in a sort of fisherman's costume, and actively gesticulating, keep up a continual cry, sometimes in harsh and discordant tones, though more often in long and melodious cadences, resembling more the notes of some fisher's song than the cry of an ordinary salesman.

And now the great day has arrived, for in Naples the greatest festivities take place on the evening of Christmas Eve. They begin with the dinner, which, even in families used to an early dinner, is put off till after dark; and an invitation to dinner on this day is generally understood to extend both to Christmas and to Boxing Days. The average dinner consists of macaroni with a fish or a garlic and parsley sauce. Then come various sorts of fish, dressed in different ways, and the never-failing *capitone*, a pie of endive with capers, raisins, and anchovies intermixed, a *caponata*, or compound salad, fruit and *struffoli* with various other sweets. Dinner over, the Christmas games are played, lasting till about eleven o'clock at night, when the religious ceremonies begin. They may take place either in church or in private houses, a special permission being accorded on such occasions. The spectacle in the Cathedral is, of course, the most brilliant; and the service on this night is peculiar in this, that, at a certain point in it, a shining star is drawn across the church, an emblem, of course, of the star of Bethlehem. In private houses the ceremony consists of sacred music, Mass being celebrated three times, after which a little figure of the infant Jesus is presented to each person to be kissed. Refreshments are then partaken of while fireworks are let off, and Bengal lights are burnt on the balconies, after which the guests are at liberty to retire.

Only a very few years back it was by no means pleasant walking through the streets on this night, for as soon as the church solemnities ended, such an explosion of squibs and great crackers commenced, that the noise was simply deafening, and numerous accidents were invariably reported in the newspapers afterwards. In the theatres there is a special performance for this evening called *The Song of the Shepherds*, being, of course, a representation of the birth of Christ, though now corrupted by the introduction of some purely Neapolitan characters. These entertainments, however, often come to a somewhat riotous end, owing probably to the late and unusually abundant dinner both of the actors and the spectators.

And here the Christmas festivities may be said to end, for on Christmas Day itself nothing particular takes place. The dinner, of course, is a holiday one, in which the capon, turkey, or goose, forms an item; but the habit of giving Christmas presents is by no means universal in Naples, and Father Christmas is unknown to Neapolitan children.