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CHRISTMAS AT THE GERMAN COURT.

As being at once interesting and likely to be overlooked unless here made permanent, I venture to deal with a communication from the Berlin correspondent of the Daily News. An old custom, he says, prescribes the celebration of Christmas by the royal family of Prussia in a private manner at the Emperor's palace, in which the "blue dining-hall" on the first floor is specially arranged for the festival. In this room are two long rows of tables, two smaller tables (which remain empty until the Emperor and Empress have left the hall, being destined to hold the presents for their Majesties) being placed in the corners on each side of the pillared door leading to the ball-room. On the rows of tables stand twelve of the finest fir trees, almost reaching to the ceiling, covered with countless white wax candles in wire holders, but otherwise undecorated. In the afternoon of Dec. 24 great packages of presents for the Imperial household are brought in, and the chamberlain, in the Emperor's presence, distributes them on the tables under the trees. "The venerable monarch always takes an active part in this work, and, walking about briskly from one table to the other, helps to place the objects in the most advantageous positions, and fastens on them slips of white paper on which he himself has written the names of the recipients. The Empress is also present, sitting in her easy chair, and occupied with arranging the presents for the ladies of her own household." At four o'clock the entire royal family, down to the fourth generation, meet in the large dining-hall for their Christmas dinner. The Emperor is always in excellent humour. In 1884 he celebrated his eighty-eighth Christmas; opposite to him sat his great-grandson, little Prince William, who will one day be the fourth German Emperor, eating his third Christmas dinner. In addition to the whole of the princes and princesses, without exception, and the members of the Imperial household, the guests include the chiefs of the military and civil cabinets and a number of adjutants. Soon after dinner is ended, at a sign from the Emperor, the double doors leading to the blue hall are thrown wide open, and the brilliant sight of the twelve great fir-trees behind thousands of lighted tapers is disclosed to view. This is the great moment of the German Christmas Eve celebration. The Emperor gives his arm to the Crown Princess, the Crown Prince follows with the Empress, and the other couples also form in procession, and all proceed to the Christmas room. The Emperor and the Empress then personally lead the members of their households to the presents which are grouped in long rows on the tables, and which comprise hundreds of articles, both valuable and useful, objects of art, pictures, statuary, &c. Meanwhile, the two separate tables still remain hidden under white draperies. In other rooms all the officials and servants of the palace, down to the youngest stable-boy, are presented with their Christmas boxes. At about nine o'clock the Imperial family and their guests again return to the dining-room, where a plain supper is then served. According to old tradition, the menu always includes the following dishes: 'Carp cooked in beer' (a Polish custom), and 'Mohlpfannen,' an East Prussian dish, composed of poppy-seed, white bread, almonds, and raisins, stewed in milk. After the supper all return once more to the Christmas room, where the second part of the celebration—the exchange of presents among the Royal Family—then comes off. The Emperor's table stands on the right side of the ball-room door, and every object placed on it bears a paper with such inscriptions as:—'Papa von Kron Prinzessin Victoria,' 'Papa von Fritz und Victoria,' 'Grosspapa von Wilhelm und Augusta Victoria,' &c. The presents for the Emperor on the other table are arranged in the same manner. Among the objects never missing at the Emperor's Christmas are some large Nuremberg ginger cakes, with the inscription 'Weihnachten,' and the year. About half-an-hour later tea is taken, and this terminates the Christmas Eve of the first family of the German Empire.

WILFRED HARGRAVE.

CHRISTMAS IN BELGIUM.

Belgium, although retaining, in all probability, more medieval customs and observances than most European countries, pays little respect to Christmas as a social festival. Its festivities are for the most part, under French influences, devoted to New Year's Day. It is, however, by all devout and zealous Roman Catholics regarded as a solemn feast of the Church, and, after Easter, as the most
important in the calendar. Formerly Christmas was preceded by a season of strict abstinence, which lasted the whole of Advent, during which there was an entire disuse of flesh; this rule is now confined to monastic establishments. Advent being thus a penitential season, the priest during mass wears violet and does not chant the "Gloria in excelsis." The services of Christmas Day are always of a joyful character, and everything that art and music can contribute is done to give éclat to the celebration. The midnight mass, formerly an essential feature of this festival, is now nearly confined to monasteries.

In all Catholic churches on Christmas Day each priest may celebrate mass three times, and for each of these masses there is, in the Missal, a special office provided. The significance of the three masses is fully explained in the learned work of Don Prosper Gueranger, 'L'Année Liturgique; Deuxième Section; Le Temps de Noël," pp. 135-261.

Carol singing, anciently so popular, is no longer general; but the practice is not quite extinct in some country villages.

The decking of Christmas trees, presenting toys to children, and sending out Christmas cards scarcely obtain in Belgium, except in some families of German or English origin.

The construction of créches and grottoes to represent the Nativity is continued principally in convents; in parish churches it is rare.

It will be seen that Christmas, while still a great festival of the Church, has to some extent fallen from its high estate in Belgium as in France. In ancient Flanders, and in the Teutonic provinces generally, Christmas had anciently many more joyous accompaniments. Some of the customs were very curious. In the Flemish villages, after the midnight mass, a young man, wearing on his naked shoulders wings to represent the Archangel Gabriel, recited the "Ave Maria" to a young girl, who replied, "Fiat"; the angel then kissed her on the mouth. Afterwards a child, enclosed in a great pasteboard cock, cried, imitating the crow of the cock, "Puer natus est nobis"; a great ox, bellowing, said "Oubi" (ubi t); a long procession, preceded by four sheep, cried "Bethléem"; an ass cried "H/chanus," for gammus; and a great crowd, with bells and little images of the Virgin, brought up the rear.

The superstitions respecting Christmas in ancient Belgium were many. Young girls taking a candle to the wells at midnight might see the faces of their future husbands. A light extinguished on the table at the Christmas feast foreshadowed the death of one guest. A child born on Christmas Eve ought to be named Adam or Eve, according to sex. A child born on Christmas Day would be gifted with a rare intelligence; for "Il voit les esprits divins."