

A WALK IN DECEMBER.

“And after him came next the chill December:
Yet he, through merry feasting which he made
And great bonfires, did not the cold remember;
His Saviour’s birth his mind so much did glad:
Upon a shaggy-bearded Goat he rode,
The same wherewith Dan Jove in tender yeares,
They say, was nourisht by th’ læan Mayd;
And in his hand a broad deepe bowle he beares,
Of which he freely drinks an health to all his peeres.”
—*Spenser*.

DECEMBER, so called from the Latin *decem*, ten, before January and February were added to the calendar, was not only the tenth but also, as it is again to-day, the last month of the year. To our ancestors it was the “winter monat, to wit, winter cometh: but after the Saxons received Christianity, they then, of devotion to the birth-time of Christ, termed it by the name of heligh-monat, that is to say, holy-cometh.” It is still Christmonat in Germany as Christmas Day is Christtag and Weihnachts-tag (Holy-night Day). It was also known as Midwinter-monath and Guil erra, the prime of first guil, January being the Æftera, or latter, guil. According to Dr. Sayers “The feast of Thor, which was celebrated at the winter solstice, was called *guil* from *iol*, or *ol*, which signified *ale*, and is now corrupted into *yule*. This festival appears to have been continued through part of January.” *The Century Dictionary* gives *se ærra geola*, December, *se æftera geola*, January, “the months beginning respectively before and after the winter solstice,” as equivalent to “Yule,” but states that the origin of the word is unknown.

In December occurs the shortest day, commonly the 21st, for after this date the hours of daylight gradually increase till they

[p 113]

reach their maximum at midsummer. But winter nights bring full compensation for their darkness in the brilliancy of the starry heavens, that glorious witness to the Hand Divine which George Meredith in his fine sonnet *Lucifer in Starlight* depicts as overwhelming the spirit of the proud rebel when

“Soaring through wider zones that pricked his scars
With memory of the old revolt from Awe,
He reached a middle height, and at the stars,
Which are the brain of heaven, he looked, and sank,
Around the ancient track marched rank on rank
The army of unalterable law.”

The Northern Hemisphere contains a much larger number of constellations and a greater proportion of first magnitude stars than does the Southern—the Great and Little Bear, Boötes, Cassiopeia, Perseus and Andromeda, Hercules, Taurus, Pegasus, Auriga, Gemini, Leo, Aquila, Cyngus, [sic] Cetus, Eridanus, Canis Major and Minor.

“Orion, kneeling [sic] in his starry niche,
The Lyre, whose strings give music audible
To holy ears, and countless splendours more.”

Superstition warns us that to point at the stars will bring rain, a fancy prettily expressed in the German saying, that the stars are the angels’ eyes and to point at them will make them weep. The French say, “Quand les Etoiles sont plus brillantes que de coutume pluie est probable,” and

“Ciel très étoilé
N’est pas de longue durée,”

while

“Lorsque beaucoup d’étoiles filent en Septembre
Les tonneaux sont alors trop petits en Novembre,”

and the Maltese say that when the stars twinkle we cry “wind.” Now

“That orbèd maiden with white fire laden
Whom mortals call the moon,”

and about which every continent and peoples has its own special myth, rides high in the clear sky,—for the sun is at its lowest altitude; and as she “glides glimmering o’er” the “fleece-like-floor” with a white world of snow underneath the scene is one of indescribable beauty.

The peculiar whiteness of snow is due to the fact that owing to the air entangled among the flakes the light cannot penetrate, but is reflected from point to point of the tiny crystals of which

[p 114]

the flakes consist; these crystals break up the rays of light into prismatic hues, and these uniting with the rays from other crystals produce the pure white colour. At night snow is slightly phosphorescent, while in sunshine the little crystals sparkle like innumerable diamonds. Each flake is composed of tiny spicules of ice, formed by the condensation of aqueous vapour round minute particles of dust. The shape varies from the simple hexagon to elaborate and intricate stars, but in all the spicules of ice are arranged at angles of 60° or 120°, the lower the temperature the smaller the size of the flake and the more elaborate the pattern. Over a thousand different forms of snowflakes have been recorded, and these have been divided into five classes, but in each separate snow-shower there is usually only one class of snowflake. On a calm day each flake is separate and distinct, but in windy weather they are blown one against another into irregular masses.

To the agriculturist snow is a welcome visitor, enriching the soil and protecting it from frost, the ground underneath being sometimes as much as 60° warmer than the surrounding air; indeed, it has been noticed that delicate Swiss flowers, which on their native Alps are

sheltered under a soft blanket of snow, cannot stand the cold of an English winter. So lightly do the flakes lie one above another that ten inches of snow will only yield an inch of water, and air imprisoned in its meshes retains the heat in the ground in the same way as a woollen shawl, for the same reason, preserves the temperature of the body, and birds, in cold weather, fluff out their feathers to keep themselves warm. Similarly a coating of ice is a protection to open water—

“Down swept the chill wind from the mountain peak
From the snow five thousand summers old;
On open wold and hill-top bleak
It had gathered all the cold.

.
The little brook heard it and built a roof
'Neath which he could house him, winter-proof:
All night by the white stars' frosty gleams
He groined his arches and matched his beams;
Slender and clear were his crystal spars
As the lashes of light that trim the stars;

.
Sometimes his tinkling waters slipt
Down through a frost-leaved forest-crypt,
Long, sparkling aisles of steel-stemmed trees
Bending to counterfeit a breeze;

[p 115]

Sometimes the roof no fretwork knew
But silvery mosses that downward grew;
Sometimes it was carved in sharp relief
With quaint arabesques of ice-fern leaf;
Sometimes it was simply smooth and clear
For the gladness of heaven to shine through, and here
He had caught the nodding bulrush-tops
And hung them thickly with diamond drops,
That crystallised the beams of moon and sun,
And made a star of every one;
No mortal builder's most rare device
Could match this winter-palace of ice.”

Ice, like snow, is composed of six-sided crystals, but these are not visible as long as they are frozen; when, however, a crystal melts its outline may be seen through the microscope as a water-star among the surrounding ice. Owing to the peculiar property of water in expanding before freezing and contracting to its original bulk on thawing, the water in these stars does not fill the cavity left by melting. It is this expansion that enables ice to break, not only our water-pipes, but solid cliffs and rocks, and to crumble the clods in our fields and gardens into serviceable soil. Prolonged frost rarely occurs in Britain before the New Year, and country folk

have a saying, "If there is ice that will bear a duck before Martlemas (St. Martin's Day, November 11th) there will be none that will bear a goose all the Winter."

"Bite, frost, bite!
You roll up away from the light
The blue wood-louse, and the plump dormouse,
And the bees are stilled, and the flies are kill'd,"

but there is one little creature still active, for

"The poetry of earth is ceasing never;
On a lone winter evening, when the frost
Has wrought a silence, from the stone there shrills
The cricket's song."

Like the Grasshopper, Cockroach, and Locust, the Cricket belongs to the order of Orthoptera, straight-winged insects; these pass through no passive stage, but develop by a series of changes and the advanced larvæ much resemble the adult. The sub-family *Saltatoria* or jumpers, to which Grasshoppers and Crickets belong, is sometimes known as the Musical Orthoptera, from the loud chirping of the males, which chirping, in the case of the Cricket, and certain Grasshoppers, is made by rubbing one wing-case against the other; the ears, in the form of a pit-like depres-

[p 116]

sion furnished with drums and nerve, are situated at the top of the fore-legs.

There are four species of British Crickets. The House Cricket (*Gryllus domesticus*) is reddish brown in colour and usually found indoors, though it may be sometimes seen in the open air in summer time. Quiet through the day it comes out at night in search of crumbs and scraps of food. Its favourite haunts are near the fire-place, and if deprived of heat it becomes more or less dormant in winter. The Field Cricket (*G. campestris*) is darker and rather larger, and is found, as its name denotes, in fields and meadows, where it lives in burrows in the ground. The fore-legs of the Mole Cricket (*Gryllotalpa vulgaris*) are thick and short and shaped like those of a mole, ending in four strong claws. Two to three hundred eggs are laid in its burrow, and the young do not reach maturity for nearly three years. The last species, the Wood Cricket, (*Nemobius sylvestris*) is generally found among dead leaves in woods, in the Southern counties; it is the smallest of the four, being little more than a third of an inch in length.

Out-of-doors, where the earth is soft, little heaps of soil on the surface show where the Mole is digging deeper underground to find the Earthworms upon which it feeds, and on the soft snow are the foot-prints of Hare or Rabbit, and the tracks of various birds. These last suffer severely from thirst during frosty weather and a saucer of water should always accompany the breakfast of moist bread-crumbs and scraps which kindly hands offer.

Few flowers greet us, but an occasional Daisy, Groundsel, Mayweed, or late Red Campion bloom by the wayside, a stray Primrose may be gathered here and there, and in the garden the "Christmas rose, the last flower of the year," opens its snowy petals. The plant is a species of Hellebore (*Helleborus niger*) and an old name for it is Christ's herb. Legend tells us

that after the presentation of the Magi's gifts a little shepherd girl stood weeping because she had nothing to offer to the Holy Child. An Angel drew near, and brushing away the snow, revealed to her sorrowing eyes the Christmas Rose, saying "Nor gold, nor myrrh, nor yet frankincense, is offering more meet for the Christ Child than these pure winter roses." The French name, Rose-de-Noel, is equivalent to the English, and in Marienstein, Alsace, there is a tradition that in the very night and hour in which the Saviour was born a little thornless rose first blossomed among the snow. Another legend, which is similar to that of the Snowdrop, [p 117]

says that the plant first grew in the gardens of Heaven, where it was tended by the angels under the name of the "rose of love," and that after the Fall the angels begged permission to carry the flower to earth, to console the unhappy pair,

"Since when this winter rose
Blossoms amid the snows
A symbol of God's promise, care and love."

The Privet still retains its black berries, and the Holly is bright with scarlet fruit, for its berries, being astringent, are not popular with birds while other food is obtainable. At this season the Romans, at the Feast of Saturnalia, decorated their temples and dwellings with green boughs; and among the more northern nations where Druidism ruled, "the houses," says Brand in his *Antiquities*, "were decked with evergreens in December, that the sylvan spirits might repair to them, and remain unrippled with frost and cold winds, until a milder season had renewed the foliage of their darling abodes." It was thought at one time that the Holly (*Ilex aquifolium*) was so called from its use in Christmas decorations—the Holy tree, and Middle English spelling gives the forms *holly*, *holy* and *holie*, but it is now considered that the word has the same root as the Irish *cuileann*, German *hülse*, and Old French *houlx*, the old Anglo-Saxon is *holen*, *holegn*; a contracted form of the latter gives *holm*, also applied to the Holm-oak or Holly-oak. Spenser in the *Faerie Queen* speaks of "the carver holme." (Book I. canto I). The reason why the upper leaves of the Holly are devoid of the spikes found upon the lower boughs has long puzzled botanists, one suggestion being that the spikes are protective against cattle, etc., devouring the young tree, and that the upper boughs, being out of reach of grazing animals, needed no such protection, a view embodied in Southey's well-known *The Holly Tree*; possibly the prickliness of the leaves may depend upon the nature of the surrounding soil, the poorer the ground, the more spiny the foliage. The waxy greenish-white flowers appear in May and grow in clusters close to the stem.

Holly has been considered a sacred shrub from very early times; dedicated to Saturn by the Romans, who decked his temples with it, it is employed by the Parsees in their baptismal rites, and in Norse mythology Baldur is represented as standing by a Holly when struck by the fatal arrow. His blood was transformed into scarlet berries, and the tears of his wife, Nauna, [p 118]

into the pearly fruit of the Mistletoe. Christian sentiment ascribed a more sacred character still to the red berries, associating the Crown of Thorns with the prickly leaves; an old carol runs,

"Now of all the trees by the King's high-way,

Which do you love the best?
O, the one that is green upon Christmas day,
The bush with the bleeding breast:
Now the holly with her drops of blood for me
For that is our dear Aunt Mary's tree."

while another, in honour of the shrub, declares

"Whosoever against holly do cry
In a rope shall be hung full high.
Allelujah."

for

"Of all the trees that are in the wood,
The holly bears the crown."

Mistletoe (*Viscum album*) takes its name from the Anglo-Saxon *mistel*, bird-lime prepared from the plant, and *tan*, a twig. The small, greenish-coloured flowers appear in March. Though the Mistletoe family comprises 500 species, only one is known in Britain, the familiar twig of our Christmas decorations, and the sacred plant of the Druids. It was cut with special ceremony at the winter solstice, when two white oxen were sacrificed [sic] and bonfires lighted, which bonfires were probably the origin of the burning of the Yule Log, as also of the rule which prescribes that Christmas evergreens must be burnt when taken down, not thrown away. It is said that after it had caused the death of Baldur, his mother, Frigg, ordained that never more should the Mistletoe touch Earth, the kingdom of Loki, lest further mischief should accrue, but that it should remain suspended between heaven and earth, and under it should be exchanged the kiss of peace.

Other plants which were used for Christmas decoration and mentioned in Herrick's well-known *Ceremonies for Candlemas Eve*, are the Rosemary and Bay, and to these may be added the Cherry-laurel or Common Laurel, which was introduced into England in the 16th century, and spoken of by Gerarde as a choice garden shrub: Fir and Yew also bear their part. Holly is the badge of the clan of the Mackenzies, Fir of the Grants, and Yew of the Frasers.

The Common Fir, perhaps, has the most right to the title of Christmas tree, for though Holly is sometimes spoken of as Christmas it is the green pyramid of resinous boughs laden with presents and lighted tapers that rises before us when we use the
[p 119]

name. Though such trees first became usual in England after their introduction into the Court of Queen Victoria, some form of Christmas tree was not wholly unknown before that date. Stow mentions a tree in Cornhill, full of holme and ivy for Christmas, and in an account of an Epiphany pageant before Henry VIII, we read of "a mountayne glisteringe by night, as tho' it had been all of golde and set with stones; on the top of whiche mountayne was a tree of golde, the branches and bowes frysed with golde, spredynge on every side over the mountayne with roses and pomegarnettes." From within the mountain a "ladye apparelled in cloth of golde, and

the children of honor called the henchmen” appeared, and “danced a morice before the King.” The ancient Egyptians symbolized the year by a Palm-tree, as that plant produced a branch a month, and so a spray of Palm with twelve shoots on it represented the completed year, and this, it has been suggested, was the origin of the Christmas tree; the Palm tree sprig of Egypt being imitated in Italy by the top of the Fir, which was decorated with burning tapers in honour of Saturn.

The Scotch Fir, more correctly the Scotch Pine (*Pinus sylvestris*) is a native of Britain, but the true Firs, the Spruce or Norway Spruce Fir, and the Silver Fir were introduced from the Continent in the 16th and 17th centuries. The Silver Fir (*Abies pectinata* or *Pinus picea*) may be distinguished from the Spruce Fir (*Picea excelsa*) by its bushy top, for while the Spruce Fir terminates in a spear-like point the Silver Fir is only pointed when quite young. The centre rib of the leaves of the Silver Fir is raised, and on each side runs a silvery line, from which the tree takes its name; these leaves are retained for eight or nine years. The cones of the Spruce Fir are longer and smoother than those of the Silver Fir, each scale of which terminates in a sharp point, while the cone of the Douglas Fir (*Abies Douglasii*) introduced into Scotland about 60 years ago, is covered with soft supplementary scales shaped like a trident. The cones of the Spruce and Douglas Firs hang downward, those of the Silver Fir are upright.

Besides the Common or Norway Spruce there are many other species, some of which form the immense forests in Canada and America. From the roots of the White Spruce (*P. alba*) the Canadian Indians prepare the thread for their canoes, and this and other species, the Black, the Himalayan, Patton’s Spruce, etc., have been introduced into Britain. The Douglas Fir is a [p 120] native of North West America, where it covers vast tracks of land, as do the Silver Fir and the Norway Spruce on the Continent, and the Corean Fir in the East.

“Harvest the sunbeams then,
Bind them in sheaves,
Range them and change them
To tufts of green leaves.

What if the maple flare
Flaunting and red,
You shall bear waxen-white
Tapers instead.
What if now, elsewhere,
Birds are beguiled,
You shall yet nestle
The little Christ-child,
Ah, the strange splendour
The fir-trees shall know,
And so,
Little evergreens, grow!
Grow, grow!
Grow, little evergreens, grow.”

The civil year is drawing to its close, but Nature's year is unending, each succeeding month but preparing the way for that which is to follow. Even now under the warm snow the bulbs are pushing out slender rootlets, and flowers stir in their sleep. A few short weeks and the birds will resume their songs, lambskins skip in the meadows, and butterflies flutter in the sunshine. "There is no death, what seems so is transition." Change, not annihilation, is the message of the changing year, and still

"In the heart of man is the hope that thrills
 To greet some far-off, perfect spring;
In the heart of God is the life that fills
 The expectant heart of everything."