

THE RUSSIAN CHRISTMAS

Wild wastes of snow-mantled steppe, valued by the starry dome of heaven, mysterious lights flickering before the glittering fane of a little temple and softened by curling clouds of fragrant incense, solemn chants of the church, weird melodies of ancient faith, the merry laughter of rustic maids seeking to pry into futurity, and the cheery shouts of young and old floating in on the frosty night air, still linger, says a writer in London Daily Telegraph, among the pleasant memories of my first Christmas in Russia. It was a quaint mixture of the sacred and the profane, a blending of the present and the future, a curious fusion of pain and pleasure. Christmas Eve being the close of a long and rigorous fast, none but the hardened sinner would dare satisfy his hunger or slake his thirst before the twinkling twilight of the first star had visibly trembled in the mysterious east. I fear I looked upon myself as a hardened sinner in the matter of fasting, but, as the guest of a wealthy and devout peasant proprietor, I had nothing for it but to mortify my body with the rest.

Between 5 and 6 o'clock in the evening we were all in church, listening to the impressive service, part of which is a Te Deum sung in thanksgiving for the scattering of "the twelve tongues," as the French army was termed in 1812. A flood of soothing sounds was sweeping away the bonds that bind men's souls to earth. But before the echoes of the last "amen!" had died away the spacious square before the place of worship was black with forms which the ear, not the eye, recognized as human, for they looked like huge sacks of corn toddling about on feet, the women and men alike being wrapped in great sheepskin coats, which covered their high heavy boots and blotted out their natural shapes. When we entered the warm room of the hospital house, wax tapers, hallowed candles and purple lamps were lighted, incense was burned, a short prayer recited, and warm words of welcome were spoken to the guests. Then the host's children were sent out to some of the neighbors with little cakes, on which were effigies of kine sheep and birds—symbols of the senders' desire that their friends might be blessed with abundance during the coming year.

WHEN PAGAN GODS HELD SWAY
Supper was spread at 8 o'clock—a few symbolical and unsubstantial dishes which were in vogue in days of yore when pagan gods still held sway in heaven and upon earth. On a round table, over which a layer of hay was first scattered, a white-bleached cloth was spread. Even in households where linen is dispensed with all the year round the spotted cloth must be forthcoming at Christmas. The table was placed beneath the gorgeous icon or holy image, without which no Russian dwelling is habitable and across the glass and gold of which the soft glow of a purple lampet was playing. A medley of apples, pears, dried cherries, oranges and grapes stewed in water, sweetened with honey, and served up cold, formed the piece de resistance. In another dish a mass of wheat porridge and honey was of "distilled damnation," more commonly called vodka.

Having wished our entertainers and each other joy of the festival, the host drew near the table, slipped a large wooden spoon into the porridge, and deftly hurled the soft mass against the ceiling—an old custom, which, in its origin, was a sacrifice to the Frost-God, whose wrath it was intended to appease. All the family and the guests rushed up to look at the result, and a murmur of "Glory unto God!" burst from their lips. Nearly all the porridge had stuck to the ceiling and the window—a sure sign that the coming harvest would be plentiful. To me all this was poetic and interesting, but not very filling; and when the meal was over, and my empty inside was on fire with the vodka, I felt that I could do rough justice to another repast. But the servants and farm laborers came trooping into the apartment, sat down in our places, and were waited on by the hosts and their guests. When they, too, had cheated their appetites and fired their stomachs we all drew round the table, and each, in turn, pulled out a blade of hay, by the length of which the nature of next year's crop is divined.

TO WARM THE SHIVERING SOULS.

Suddenly the blaze of a huge fire, visible through the double windows, alarmed me, for I thought the out-houses were burning. But my anxiety was quieted by the host, who explained that he had a fire lighted in the yard, according to the pious custom, to warm the shivering souls of the dead, who are wont to revisit their homes at this holy season. While watching the tongues of flame lapping up the great logs of birch and oak I was startled by the jingling of bells, the strains of melancholy songs, the creaking of crisp snow under the tread of heavy feet and the rolling of a drum. All at once a dense mass of confused shadows darkened the earth's white car-

pet, and hid some of the snow-blossomed branches of the leafless cherry trees. It was the village lads and lasses singing the Kolyadi songs handed down from pagan times. The "waits" belonged to every social class, without distinction, Christmas having levelled them all.

Enormous sacks were carried by the rustic for the perquisites. Into these they stowed away bacon, sausages, linen, lard, flax and other offerings, with which their efforts were rewarded at every house they visited. One of these receptacles yawned wide as soon as the noise had subsided, and our host dropped in a large piece of bacon and some bread, besides a silver rouble which he gave to one of the singers, and a bottle of vodka to another. Then the noise began anew, caused by a friendly struggle for the sacks. Several lads were tripped up by the lasses, others became targets for snowballs, gladness was coined into rhymes and jokes, and thus, jostling, shouting, falling and singing, the shadows shifted off in the moonlight from the background of sparkling snow and star-strewn sky, and voices and music died slowly away in the wintry air.

PEEPS INTO THE FUTURE.

At Christmas tide in Russia the dead return to visit the quick, and the unseen world is so closely drawn to the veil of futurity, woven by the hands of pity and love, can, it is believed, be surreptitiously raised. At any rate, the youth of both sexes leave nothing undone to get a peep at the seed-plot of time. The girls are especially eager to discover whether the ensuing year will bring them together with the partners of their joys and sorrows, and, it may be, to be told their names and characters, as well, and many a heavy-hearted maiden fancies she descries a faint streak of better luck in the darkness of the future horizon the sorrows of the present, or learns that when another Christmas has come round, her own soul, disembodied for aye, will be coming back to visit her home along with the other shivering spirits whose advent she is welcoming to-night. Innumerable are the keys which are said to open the gates of futurity at this festive season of the year. Lead or wax is melted, poured through a key into a tub of water, and the molten mass, shaped by the invisible being as it falls, becomes a symbol of destiny. Two mirrors are placed opposite each other, with a candle burning before each; the girl sits between them gazing intently and silently at the reflected back of her head, until strange fancies chase each other through her brain, shadows flit before her eyes, "airy tongues that syllable men's names" are heard, and she beholds the future darkly as in a glass. Throwing a shoe across the threshold of the house at the dead of night is another way of finding out what the future has in store. The wicket, or gate, is opened, and the slipper thrown over the threshold into the street. She may expect her bridegroom from the direction in which it points when found. If the toe be turned toward her home the omen is inauspicious; marriage during the coming twelve months is denied her by the fates, and it may be, life as well.

THE KING'S CHRISTMAS

HE LIKES TO SPEND IT WITH HIS FAMILY.

His Majesty Is Seen at His Best as a Christmas Host.

His Majesty keeps Christmas in a very simple manner. With all the opportunities to travel in the most splendid luxury to foreign climes where the climate is more genial, and where the greater privacy, which the King so much likes, is more easily obtainable, he remains quietly at home. Does he not, in doing so, clearly prove how very nearly akin he is to his subjects in his desire to be at this festive season amidst his own folk at his own homestead?

With all the pressing invitations and inducements to visit other centres, where the amusements and the outward homage and the magnificence of the rejoicings would be on a bigger scale than they are at the King's country home, his Majesty prefers to stay where he can be of the greatest personal service, where his devotion to the tenants on his own landed estate can best be exemplified.

There is the dinner of roast beef and plum pudding, usually given in one of the huge out-buildings, to the farm-hands and cottagers. This function is invariably attended during its progress by the King and his Royal Consort.

There is the servants' dinner, which is held by the Sovereign's gracious permission in the Servants' Hall, and which is never voted a success unless the Royal master and mistress pay a visit in person accompanied by the majority of the nobility who are the guests of their Majesties.

In asking his guests to accompany him to the Servants' Hall, the King lets it be plainly seen that he considers it the duty of all who keep servants to take a practical interest in their *esabbs*.

EVEN THE CHILDREN on the Sandringham estate are not

overlooked by the King. A Punch and Judy show, a "bran pie," and a number of other never-failing attractions are provided for the youngsters' special benefit.

His Majesty has even been known to alter his private plans in order that he and his friends might be able to put in an appearance at the entertainment so thoughtfully organized for the little ones, whose parents have the honor of serving one of the kindest as well as one of the most considerate of employers.

The King's own grandchildren, who, with their parents, the Prince and Princess of Wales, are close neighbors, are frequently invited over to see the good things intended for the servants' children. The little Princes and their sister are not to be kept away from their cheery grandparent, and well they know to whom they should apply in case there is the smallest likelihood of any of their privileges being curtailed. The presents which they value the most, after those given by their own parents, are those given them

BY THE KING.

Often the presents have not been sent; they have been conveyed by the King himself, who delights in being an actual witness of the happiness that he is instrumental in giving.

His Majesty has on occasions made surprise visits to York Cottage in order to satisfy himself that the little Princes are thoroughly enjoying themselves, and that there is nothing more wanting that is at all likely to add to their pleasure.

The King always attends Divine service on the morning of Christmas Day. And it is usual for the party of assembled guests to attend also. No matter how inclement the weather may be, how inviting the cosy fireside, how pressing the many duties as head of a big estate, the King walks or drives to the small country church where he devoutly follows each item of the service, joining heartily in the hymn and Psalm singing.

His Majesty, like everyone else, has his favorite hymns, and one of these of which he is said to be fond is "Praise, the herald angels sing, Glory to the newborn King," which many of us will sing within our own places of worship.

No matter what the day is or how much the King may wish to be free from duties, there are always a very large number of

OFFICIAL MATTERS

connected with affairs of State to which his Majesty must give direct attention. Many papers have to be considered and dealt with without loss of time, otherwise serious complications might arise in various quarters. Of course, the King has the assistance of secretaries and other important gentlemen, but the Royal signature has to be put at the foot of many documents, and the King always satisfies himself as to the exact import of a paper before signing it.

So that it will be seen that even Christmas at Sandringham is not altogether free from the responsibilities that are more fitting to the solemnity of the London Council chamber.

As a Christmas host the King is without doubt seen at his best, that is, from a private standpoint. Each one of his guests feels that he or she has the regard and friendship of the Royal entertainer.

His Majesty is endowed to a quite remarkable extent with that rare and happy gift of impressing every individual about him with that wholesome feeling of real—as distinct from sham—personal interest and esteem.

WHY WE DECORATE AT CHRISTMAS.

Why do we decorate at Christmas? Why the gifts on the Christmas-tree? Why the holly about the walls, and the laurel over the pictures? Why, above all and the center of all, these green and living growths, the mistletoe-boughs?

Christmas seized upon these things for the celebration of the festival not because they were green, but because of the power that held them green, that kept them alive, that preserved in them the beauty of life, notwithstanding the snow and sleet, the wind and chilling rain and the withering blast.

It is the spirit of these living growths that appeals to us when all the rest of inanimate Nature appears to be sleeping under the mantle of winter. Before Christmas was, the spirits behind the green were believed in by an imaginative people, and the great festival adapted them.

The ancient Druids believed in the spirits of the holly, of the laurel, of the great green trees that formed the walls and living arches of their temples. To them these things were peopled with sylvan spirits that loved the growth and kept them green by protecting them from winter frosts. They took the branches within their dwelling, believing that the spirits would follow, and there exercise their protecting care.

Among these spirits they believed none to be more powerful or capable of bringing greater blessing than those of the mistletoe.

These beliefs have gone from the world, but we cling to the emblems of them, and rejoice amid them at the Christmas celebration.

HOLIDAY GAMES

After the Christmas dinner people are usually not inclined for much exertion, but they want some kind of light amusement. Some of the old-fashioned "divination" tricks then come in nicely.

Such feats are frequently performed by two persons, one playing the part of the "professor" or wizard in chief, the other that of "medium." One of the simplest tricks of the kind is the indicating by the medium of some object which has been agreed upon by the company during her absence from the room. On her return the magician, after placing her under (supposed) mesmeric influence by a few sham "passes," proceeds to interrogate her.

"Do you know the article that has been named?" "Yes." (She doesn't; but strict truthfulness is not expected from conjurers). "Is it the moon?" "No." "Is it the sun?" "No." "Is it a coin?" "No." And so on, till the right article is named, when she replies:—"Yes."

There are various ways of giving the clue. In one version of the trick the medium is instructed to say "Yes" to the first article named next after a four-legged object (animate or inanimate). This is a very old form of "key," but not very widely known, and we have often seen it mystify a roomful of people. If, however, the trick is repeated before the same company, it may be as well, on the second occasion to agree on a new kind of key-word, say a flower or bird.

In another form of the trick the performer does not speak at all, but in this case the object selected must be something in the room. On the return of the medium, the performer merely points with his wand (or any convenient substitute, say a ruler, or a lady's fan) to various objects in succession. The first half-dozen or so are met with a negative, but when he touches the right one a confident "yes" is the answer.

The secret here is equally simple. At the outset the performer grasps the wand, all the fingers encircling it. When he points to the right object the forefinger is allowed to lie along it. Unless the secret is known beforehand, it is absolutely safe from detection.

On a similar principle, but somewhat more elaborate, is the trick of **THE MYSTIC TARGET.**

The apparatus for this feat consists of a pasteboard target, having a bull's-eye and three concentric rings of different colors; and half a dozen arrows, also of different colors. (If the apparatus is homemade, these, too, may be of pasteboard). The medium retiring as before, a spectator is invited to select one of the arrows, and with it to touch any one of the rings of the target. On the medium's return she indicates, with more or less make-believe of mental effort, which arrow was used, and which circle of the target was touched with it.

Here, again, the secret lies in an agreed code of signals. The rings of the target are regarded as numbered; the bull's-eye as one, the ring nearest it to two, and so on. The arrows in like manner each bear an imaginary number, say, blue, one; black, two; green, three; red, four; white, five; yellow, six. Call the blue "azure," and the initials will come in alphabetical order, a, b, g, r, w, y; under which conditions the sequence of the colors will be recalled without difficulty.

The number of the particular arrow used is signalled to the medium by the way in which the wand, or its substitute, is held. Thus if it be

held by its upper end in the right hand, with one finger lying along it, two; if encircled by all the fingers, three; if encircled in like manner, but round the central four; if placed under the arm, five; if laid on the table, six. The ring of the target which has been touched may be indicated by the position of the left hand. If it grasps the lapel of the coat, the bull's-eye has been touched; if the thumb is tucked into the vest pocket, ring No. 1. If the hand is placed in the trouser pocket, No. 2; if allowed to hang down by the side, No. 3; and if resting on the hip, the white space outside the rings.

TELEGRAMS.

This is an excellent game. Each of the players gives a letter in turn, until twelve have been obtained, which are written in the same order at the top of each piece of paper. Ten minutes or a quarter of an hour are allowed, in which each player writes a sentence beginning with the chosen initials. The messages are then read aloud. It is an excellent practise for condensing one's ideas. The results are often very amusing. Some people merely string words together, but others can suggest a whole story in a few words. Supposing the letters are p, g, t, n, g, p, s, j, w, m, i. One player will evolve the following sentence which, though silly, is consecutive: "Please give Tommy the new game played since January with much joy." Another will formulate the following with exactly the same letters: "Papa getting too tiresome. No game possible. Send John with muggle, Jennie." (The name of an imaginary sender may be placed at the end if the letters allow of it, but it is optional.)

GLORIA IN EXCELSIS: A CHRISTMAS ANTHEM.

By the Very Rev. Charles W. Stubbs, D.D., Dean of Ely.

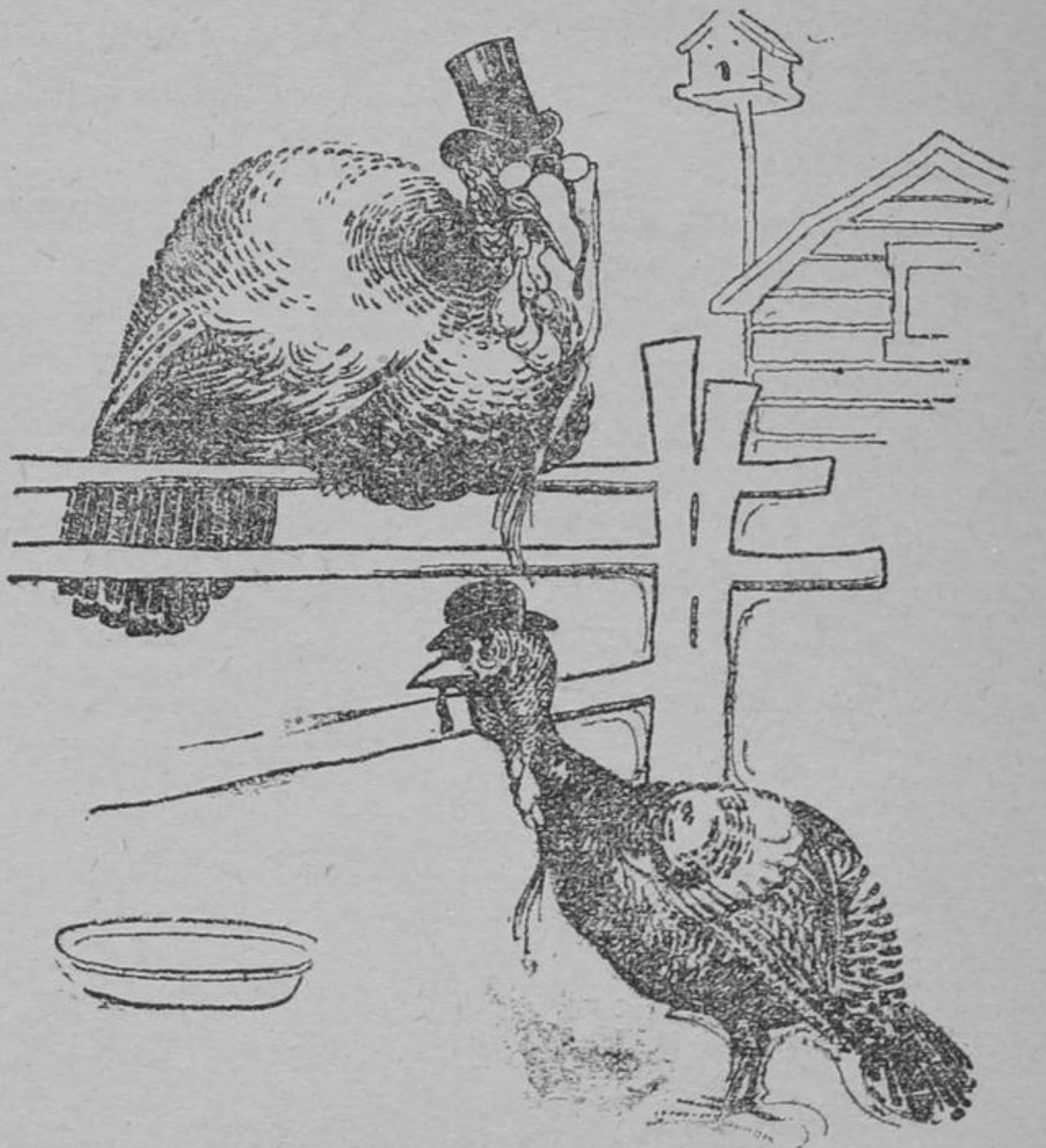
I.
O blessed town of Bethlehem
Within thy gray-green shade,
Ringed round with terraced vineyard
And depth of olive glade;
There on thy high green pastures
The shepherds watch their sheep,
The low large moon shines glimmering
O'er all the upland steep.

II.
What music of the heavens—
What magic song of bliss—
What vision of the night-tide—
What mystic light is this?
The silly sheep are blinded,
The shepherds in amaze
Stand awe-struck, all the hillside
With glory is ablaze!

III.
The Angels' joyous chorus
Rings out into the night,
O Gloria in Excelsis!
Sing praises in the height,
Sing praises, men of Bethlehem,
Sing praises here below,
For Peace on earth and good-will
He doth on you bestow.

IV.
For on this day is born there
Within your little town
A child who Christ the Lord is
Yet wears no earthly crown;
He bringeth joy and gladness
To you and all mankind,
Yea, Peace on earth and good-will
To men of equal mind.

V.
O blessed town of Bethlehem,
How happy is thy state!
How blest above all palaces
The stable at thy gate!
For there in manger-cradle
(Oh true the angel word!)
As King enthroned of all the world
Reigns Jesus Christ the Lord.
—From The Outlook.



"PRIDE GOETH BEFORE A FALL."

Young Turkey—By the way the farmer is feeding me he must think I'm a pretty fine bird!
Old Gobbler—Yes, but don't get stuffed up too much, or the first thing you know you'll lose your head entirely.