

# NEW-YEAR'S AND ITS HUMORS.

## Superstitions and Customs Connected with New Year's.

What they think of it in Russia, Germany, France and England.

### HOW TO SEE ONE'S FUTURE SPOUSE.

### WHO IS TO BE KEPT OUT OF THE HOUSE TO-DAY.

### HAPPY NEW YEAR!

The popular festivities and superstitions connected with the commencement of the New Year can probably be derived from an earlier period of antiquity than any other now-existing customs. History tells us that the practice of giving New-Year's gifts originated with TARSUS, King of the Sabines, who reigned at Rome conjointly with ROMULUS, about 2,600 years ago. Having considered as a good omen a present made on that day of some branches, cut in a wood consecrated to the goddess Strenia, he authorized the custom, and called the gifts *strenae*, from the goddess, who thenceforth became their divinity. The practice was afterwards carried to a great extent in Rome, it being the habit for clients to present their patrons with various articles which, of whatever value they might be, it was necessary to accompany with a small piece of silver, for the sake of "luck."

The Romans, although they celebrated New-Year's Day as an important festival, took care not to pass the day in idleness, for if they did, so superstition taught them, they would effect nothing during the year but spend all their time in sloth, or useless endeavors. If the contrary of this rule holds good, (and "it's a poor rule which don't work both ways,") how busy our fashionable gentlemen will be during the year, if they indulge largely in making calls to-day.

In after times, it became the practice to present gifts to the Emperors and receive others in return. TIBERIUS, however, was annoyed by the custom and did his best to put a stop to it, and though revived by many later emperors, it gradually fell into disuse.

The early Christians condemned New-Year's gifts as smacking too much of heathenism, but when, after the lapse of time, the origin of the practice was forgotten, and they were only looked upon as tokens of love and friendship, they were again considered orthodox.

Some of the ladies and gentlemen connected with the early churches seem, however, to have been inclined to continue various sports to which they had been accustomed before their conversion; for we find ST. MAXIMUS and PETER CHRYSOLOGUS declaiming against the practice of Christians "running around the streets masked, in imitation of the superstitions of the Gentiles," and in some of the very ancient missals there stands written in the mass of the day, "*Missa ad prohibendum ab laois.*"

Presents were continued to be given on New-Year's day until the sixth century, when Christmas, having been legally instituted, the custom was, in most countries transferred to that day. But, of course, such an event as the end of an old year and the commencement of a new, would ever be a cause for various manners and superstitions, and accordingly we find them practiced on New-Year's eve and day in all European countries. One custom there is which prevails in all, and which smacks exceedingly of the "almighty dollar." It is for disguised persons to go from house to house, singing songs and obtaining money in return; this is met with in all lands.

#### NEW-YEAR'S IN RUSSIA.

In Russia New Year's eve is celebrated with great unanimity, and numerous are the methods used by both high and low society to anticipate the knowledge of the events of the coming year. The night is usually spent in social parties, and as the witching hour approaches, all get ready for the ceremonies. Among these is the practice of pouring melted wax or lead into a basin of cold water, and then from the shape it assumes, prognosticating the fate of the person who poured it. Those who do the thing only for sport, of course find the principal pleasure in the interpretation put upon these forms; but there are thousands who firmly believe in the sign, and to whom the result is a matter of much importance.

Another way is to take two bowls of water, to the inside edges of which pieces of paper are affixed, on which are written the names of the single ladies and gentlemen present, a bowl for each sex. A wax taper is then set afloat on the surface of each bowl, and those persons who have the good fortune to have their names burned simultaneously will be married during the year.

On the same evening the single ladies and gentlemen of the higher classes are invited to a ball, while those who are not so happy as to have one, go out themselves, and, stopping the first person of the opposite sex whom they see, they demand his or her first name. This is carefully treasured; for, of course, it is the name of the future spouse.

This belief certainly affords an excellent opportunity to an enterprising young man who is not unwilling to expend a small sum in bribery to fix his name favorably in the memory of his lady love, and we should not be surprised if the names were often obtained in that way.

There are many other superstitions practiced which are mostly similar to the German ones, and the worst is, that they are very generally believed in, and not by the ignorant alone.

#### THE GERMAN NEW YEAR.

In Germany every one sits up to watch in the New Year and spends the time in social pleasures. Among the peasantry and lower classes superstitions, of course, abound. Pouring lead, however, is practiced among all kinds of people, and certainly very much sport is often derived from the practice.

There is one old superstition that, if a person should cry on New-Year's Day, he will meet with some great grief during the year. In consequence of this belief, of course, all try to keep bright and cheerful on that day, and postpone all sorrow till the next, on which, on that account, you are apt to see many cross faces. For the time being, however, it has a very good effect.

The peasant girls have also a way of discovering when they are to be married. They sit down flat on the floor, with their backs to the entrance of the room and their feet stretched out in front. Then, throwing up their right foot, they kick their shoe over their head. If the shoe should fall straight, with the toe pointing to the door, it signifies that they are to be married during the year, and they are, of course, happy. In the other case they are cross and discontented. From the peculiarity and freedom of the movement of the limbs required by this particular rite, it is, of course, requisite that all spectators be excluded from the room during its continuance. The belief in it is very common.

Another way of discovering the name of the future spouse is, as the clock strikes twelve, to carefully peel an apple all the way from top to bottom; then holding the peel by the upper end, between the thumb and first finger, it is to be thrown on the floor exactly behind yourself, and, of course, it forms the initial letter of the christian name of the gentleman or lady with whom you are to unite your destinies. If the peel break, or any other accident happens, you are doomed to single blessedness, and there is no help for you except to beg another year.

But if you wish to see the face of your future

spouse, we can also inform you how to do it, provided you be a lady. As the clock strikes twelve, on New-Year's Eve, you must take two wax candles, of a uniform height, and proceed into a dark room, in which there is a mirror with a table before it. Setting the candles on each side of the table, you must look steadily into the mirror for the space of one hour, at the end of which time you will see the face of your future husband. But, unless you be a person of strong nerves, we advise you not to try this experiment, as it has had several fatal terminations in Germany, death being produced by exceeding fear at the appearance of some chance person or the sound of some sudden noise.

Another method for the same object, which was formerly often adopted, was for the girl to set a table for two, but unprovided with forks. At this she must sit during the witching hour, and her future husband would come and sup with her. Whatever he left behind him she must carefully retain, and he would soon come and woo her. But it was necessary that she must keep the article from his sight forever after, or he would remember the dreadful pain which his involuntary nocturnal visit had cost him, and would take a dreadful revenge.

On New-Year's Eve, in the villages there used to go around a lot of vagabonds, who in front of each house acted a sort of "miracle play," in which Herod and the Three Wise Men of the East acted a great part, the latter of whom, after they had deposited their "gold and frankincense and myrrh" at the infant Jesus' feet, expressed their willingness to accept of a small gratuity to help them on their journey. The whole affair became at last such a scene of riot and dissipation as to call for the interference of the police, who accordingly put a stop to it towards the end of the last century.

There are, no doubt, other matters which belong to New-Year's Eve and Day in Germany, but they are confined merely to districts, while what we have narrated is universal throughout the country.

#### NEW-YEAR'S IN FRANCE.

The celebration of New-Year's Day, by the Parisians, has already been alluded to, in a former article. Recently, however, the habit of making calls on that day has greatly ceased, and in its place there has originated, as also in Vienna and other European cities, a custom which should certainly be established here. It is that a person who is unwilling to spend the necessary immense amount of time in visiting his friends, or in sending them cards, gives a sum of money to a certain benevolent institution, which institution then publishes, in the papers and by placards, the names of all such donators, who are thereupon entitled, by common consent, to the same rights and privileges as if they had presented themselves at each house in person. If our City continues to increase as immensely as it has been doing, it will be necessary for us to adopt a similar method of getting over the labor of making New-Year's calls.

In former times the Parisians celebrated, on this day, the so-called "Festival of Fools," during which all manners of absurdities and indecencies were committed. Finally, after a continuance of two hundred and forty years, it was put a stop to by the Government.

In other parts of France the common people go around from house to house singing appropriate songs, for which they obtain small gifts. One of the prettiest of these songs we find given in *Brand's Popular Antiquities*. It is as follows:

"Aguilaneuf de céans  
On le voit à sa fenêtre,  
Avec son petit bonnet blanc,  
Il dit qu'il sera le Maître,  
Metra le Pot au feu;  
Donnez nous, ma bonne Dame  
Donnez nous Aguilaneuf."

"A mighty pleasant speech, but a very unwelcome peroration," *Aguilaneuf* being derived from *Guy-lan-neuf*, the ancient French name for New Year's gifts.

In those parts of France which border on Germany, the same customs and beliefs as in that country, of course prevail. The French peasantry, however, do not seem to make as much of the day as the German. In Burgundy, for instance, they celebrate Christmas with great enthusiasm, but we cannot hear of any peculiar rites connected with New-Year's.

#### JOHN BULL'S NEW-YEAR.

Among the middle and higher classes of Old England, New-Year's Day is not much observed, except by convivial parties, who watch out the old year and the new one in, and soon after find a comfortable resting-place under the table. The bells of churches are also rung from a little before till after 12 o'clock.

Among the peasantry, however, there are many superstitions connected with it, most of which also prevail in Scotland. Thus, if a female should be your first visitor on New-Year's Day, and, moved by politeness, you should be injudicious enough to let her in, ill-luck will be sure to rest upon your household during the coming year. Nor must any ashes, or dirty water, or rubbish, or any article, however worthless, be thrown from your house during the day,—for with them luck will depart, and you will become unfortunate. But you may bring as much as you wish into the house, provided it be lawfully gotten.

In Lincoln and its neighborhood, it is only unlucky to take something out before anything has been brought in. Therefore, one can see on New-Year's morning the members of a family taking in a piece of wood or coal, or anything, in fact, to prevent the misfortunes which might otherwise happen. They often sing, meanwhile,—

"Take out, then take in;  
Bad luck will begin.  
Take in, then take out;  
Good luck comes about."

It is also believed that if any one should take a light from your house on New-Year's Day, there will be a death in the family within a year; for which reason we would warn all gentlemen about to leave a house against lighting their cigars inside.

Both of these superstitions seem to be derived from the Romans, for HOSPINIAN tells us that at Rome on New-Year's Day no one would suffer fire or anything made of iron to be removed from out of his house, nor could he be prevailed upon to lend any article, even to his best friends.

On the authority of the *Shepherd's Kalender* for 1709, we may state that "if New-Year's Day in the morning open with dusky red clouds, it denotes strifes and debates among great ones, and many robberies to happen that year." We shall therefore be enabled to tell whether the European war will continue, and if the session of Congress will be a stormy one or not. We recommend this method to the members of the Stock Board. In Scotland on the last day of the year the children go from door to door asking for bread and cheese, called "Nog Money," in the following words:

"Get up, gude wife, and binno sweir, (be not lazy)  
And deal your cakes and cheese while you are here,  
For the time will come when ye'll be dead,  
And neither need your cheese nor bread."

Most certainly an agreeable assurance. We must confess that the following, used on similar occasions, pleases us better, though less intelligible:

"Hogmanay,  
Trolloley,  
Gie me o' your white bread,  
I'll hae none of your grey."

There are many other similar effusions of the popular bards of ancient time, differing slightly, but all agreeing in one point,—in expressing their willingness to accept something to eat and drink.

There is another practice requiring also much superstition, which is yet frequently used in some parts of Great Britain. It is called "opening the Bible," and the ceremony attended with some de-

gree of solemnity, is performed generally before breakfast, as it must be done fasting.

The process is thus performed: The Bible having been placed upon the table unopened, the person who wishes to consult it approaches and opens it at random, not being allowed to choose any particular part. He must then place his finger upon any chapter in the two open pages, which chapter is thereupon to be read aloud to the persons present. The good or bad luck, the happiness or misery of the party consulting, it is believed, will be in some manner described in the chapter.

In the North of England there yet exist many couplets connected with this period of the year, among which we find it said that,

At New-Year's tide  
The days lengthen a cock's stride  
and also,

If the grass grows in Janiveer,  
It grows the worse for't all the year.

And in the Scotch Highlands we have the following predictions from the wind:

If New-Year's Eve's night wind blow south,  
It letokeneth warmth and growth;  
If west, much milk, and fish in the sea;  
If north, much cold and storms there will be;  
If east, the trees will bear much fruit;  
If northeast, flee it, men and brute.

Another custom exists in some parts of England, where persons carry around ornamental apples or oranges, and present them to their friends on New-Year's day. They have three skewers of wood stuck in the bottom, forming a sort of tripod foundation, while the sides are adorned with oat-grains and the top with evergreens and berries.

This custom seems to be an old one, for BEN JONSON, in his *Christina's Musque*, speaks of one who "has an orange and rosemary, but not a clove to stick in it." A gilt nutmeg is also mentioned as a New-Year's gift.

In ancient times, also, the good people took care of the goblins and fairies on New-Year's Eve by setting out "mete or drynke, by nighte on the benche," in order to propitiate their favor. Although we can find no trace of this now-a-days, it is still very possible that it is sometimes practiced in some of the more ignorant districts of England.

We have thus related many of the customs and superstitions in Great Britain connected with New-Year's. There are very many to which, from want of room, we have not alluded, but most of them differ only in very small particulars from those we have given. In the other European countries of whose manners in regard to New-Year's we have any account, they do not differ materially. And, as we have said, in all, on the evening before, people go around, sing appropriate songs, and expect something more substantial in return. We read that the ancient Persians opened their New Year with Agricultural ceremonies, a practice which the Chinese also are said to follow.

Of our New-York habits in regard to the day, we of course need say nothing. Its good points are, that it gives an occasion for again calling on a lady whom you have had no opportunity of seeing for a long time, or on a family with whom you have had a falling out and being able to see whether the other party wishes also to resume the acquaintance. Thus it often brings about reconciliations. Its bad points are, that it has become an awful bore for lazy persons of the male gender, and that it leads many young men to partake too freely of the "wine so red" when offered to them by their lady friends. But whatever may be thought of any of these customs or superstitions, the day itself is a glorious one, and affords fine material for reflection. And to allow our readers to enjoy this material, we will close by wishing them all a

HAPPY NEW-YEAR.