

Calendar of Customs and Festivals.

December 6.

ST. NICHOLAS.—Born at Patara, a city of Lycia, and, though a layman, for his piety made bishop of Myra. He died in A.D. 343. The cult of St. Nicholas is specially connected with children and young people, hence many observances connected with his festival were transferred, some to Holy Innocents (Dec. 28) and some to Christmas. Various legends were current to account for this connexion. It is related that the innate piety of St. Nicholas was such that from the time of his birth he abstained from his mother's breast more than once on Wednesdays and Fridays.

More familiar is the story of the two youths who came to visit St. Nicholas at Myra while on their way to be educated at Athens, and were murdered by an innkeeper. The dismembered bodies were salted and placed in a pickling tub with some pork. On the saint, who had been informed of this event in a vision, upbraiding the innkeeper with his infamy, he repented, and the youths, miraculously made whole and brought to life at the intercession of the saint, stepped from the tub and prostrated themselves before him. Other versions make the scholars three in number. Hence originated the emblem of St. Nicholas—the naked children and the tub—and hence all schoolboys came to regard him as their patron. When a boy was hard pressed in a game and wished to cease play for a short period for any reason, the cry of 'Nic'las' secured him a brief respite, a survival of a medieval form of appeal to an overlord which still obtains in the Channel Islands, where the right of the *Clameur* or *Cri de Haro* is traditionally said to have been conferred upon the inhabitants by Rollo or Rou, Duke of Normandy. Under this privilege, anyone who considers himself wrongfully treated can secure immediate cessation of the act, pending investigation, by kneeling in the presence of two witnesses and crying 'Haro! (Ha Rou) Haro! à mon aide, Mon Prince, on me fait mal.'

A further manifestation of St. Nicholas's interest in children was the custom of making gifts to them on the morning of the saint's festival. These were said to come from St. Nicholas. This custom has now been transferred to Christmas. It has its legendary explanation in a story that St. Nicholas cast purses of money by night through the bedchamber window of a poor citizen to serve as portions for his three daughters and save them from prostitution. Hence also his patronage of virgins.

The saint's patronage of scholars was extended to all clerks, and thus he became the patron saint of parish clerks. Thieves also, as coming under his protection, were known as 'St. Nicholas's Clerks.'

In his connexion with the sea, and his protection of sailors, St. Nicholas has assumed the function Poseidon or Neptune. A chapel in Minorca dedicated to St. Nicholas was hung with votive pictures by sailors who had suffered shipwreck, in gratitude for their escape. The custom was general throughout the Roman Catholic world and recalls the *votiva tabella* to which Horace refers (*Odes* i. 5). Churches dedicated to St. Nicholas generally stood within sight of the sea. The corposant or St. Elmo's light which appears on the sails and masts of ships in stormy weather is in the Eastern Mediterranean also considered a mark of St. Nicholas's protection.

THE BOY BISHOP.—The observation of Dec. 6 as a festival in honour of St. Nicholas among schoolboys was signalled by the election of one of their number as a 'bishop.' This seems to have been especially a

custom of the grammar schools. Sports took place in which, so early as Edward I., it was necessary to prohibit the inclusion of tournaments. According to a record of Wye School, it was customary for an offering of pence and a cock to be made to the master on St. Nicholas's day. The custom of electing a boy bishop was sometimes connected with the memory of Gregory the Great, also a patron of scholars. In addition to the sports, processions headed by the boy bishop took place. In Franconia, where the deacons as well as the bishops were elected from among the boys, subsidies were demanded, not begged, in the name of the bishop in a house-to-house visitation. Processions of a similar kind took place in England, the boys receiving presents for their singing, and the blessing of the bishop. The processions through the streets were forbidden in London by proclamation in 1541.

These observances among schoolboys were a survival of what had originally been a purely ecclesiastical practice. It was the custom for the cathedral choir boys to elect one of themselves as bishop to hold office until Holy Innocents' Day. The Boy Bishop, dressed in full pontifical robes with mitre and pastoral staff, often at very great expense, as is shown by the accounts, conducted a service in the Cathedral, and preached a sermon, which had been written for him. The choir boys occupied the stalls of the Church dignitaries, who fulfilled menial offices and occupied the lowest seats. During his tenure of office the Boy Bishop was supposed to bestow any preferments which became available—sometimes on the Continent his privileges included the appointment of civil officers and police—and if he should die within the period, he was buried with the full honours of a bishop. That the ceremony sometimes degenerated into buffoonery is suggested by records which show that a fool in the usual costume with inflated bladder was included in his train. In the proclamation of Henry VIII. forbidding the procession in London, reference is made to the personation of women, and in some nunneries little girls seem to have performed the offices.

Evidences of the election of the Boy Bishop in medieval times on the Continent and in England are numerous. Salisbury provides the most detail in the "Processionale ad usum . . . Eccles. Sarum," 1566, in which an elaborate service set to music gives the whole ritual to be observed by the Boy Bishop on the eve of Holy Innocents. This was at one time thought to be the only instance in England, but the custom has been traced in a number of the cathedral cities, collegiate churches, and larger towns. It is not improbable that it was even more widely spread, and may, as has been stated by some writers, have once been celebrated in every parish. If this was really the case, it was probably in origin a popular festival taken over by the church. This would account for the wearing of vizards alluded to by some writers, and for the inclusion of women and girls in an institution essentially masculine. Apparently so early as the Synod of Constantinople in 867 there existed a practice at the courts of princes of decking out a layman as a bishop, and an attempt was then made to suppress the custom. Probably, like the Scottish 'Abbot of Unreason,' this bishop was a Lord of Misrule such as was elected at certain seasons, but especially at Christmas—a form of the more popular masquerade or carnival, when all authority was abrogated, as in the Roman saturnalia, and ultimately to be traced to the periodical observances found among primitive peoples when all taboos and regulations, particularly those affecting sexual relations, are deliberately ignored.