

Christmas was always a glorious time for the young people of Melrose. Preparations for the Feast began weeks in advance. One of the first of these was the making of the Christmas plum-puddings and some dozen large cakes intended as presents for relatives and friends. Charlie and Willie took an active part in the various stages of preparation and manufacture of these cakes and puddings. They stoned the raisins and cut the candy. They helped at the weighing of the flour, the suet, the butter and the sugar. They watched with interest their sister's deft fingers as she broke the eggs and skilfully separated yoke from white. When the different ingredients were ready, they were poured into a large earthen crock, and the boys were given the task of mixing the contents until they became a well-distributed whole. In all these operations the bidding of Scripture, " Muzzle not the ox that treadeth thy corn," was faithfully observed, and hungry little mouths were filled industriously. When at last the batter was placed in tins for the baker, the leavings at the bottom of the

crook became the property of the brothers and were transferred to mustard-tin covers, collected for the purpose, and placed in the kitchen-oven, that is to say, whenever the temptation to eat straight away the raw, delicious, golden mess, bristling with candy and currants, was overcome.

Then there was the excitement and mystery of the Christmas shopping. Everybody in Melrose, the maids not excepted, gave everybody a Christmas present. This meant much discussion and planning, so that each might get the gift desired and that there should be no duplication of presents. Besides, until the day itself arrived, no one was to know, or suspect, the nature of their Christmas-box. Accordingly, considerable ingenuity and strategy were required in buying presents, especially if the future recipients happened to be in one's company at the time, and in hiding them when bought. The money for these purchases was usually a serious problem. Little or nothing could be saved from the brothers' scanty pocket-money for Xmas presents. However, a subsidy from the Family Treasury was granted for the occasion, and grandma could always be relied on in an emergency. The days immediately preceding Christmas were spent in preparing the Christmas Tree and in decorating the house with holly and ivy, of which a generous supply was provided by Sil. Pretty effects were got with small coloured Chinese lanterns and Xmas greetings worked out in holly leaves and red berries, while from the ceiling of the hall fell a shower of snow and from the hall-lamp hung a bunch of mistletoe invitingly. It was a time-honoured custom in Melrose on Christmas Eve to distribute packages of tea and sugar, and an occasional sixpenny-piece, to the deserving poor of the neighbourhood. The brothers took an active part in this ceremony and its preparation. They helped to make the cone-shaped paper bags in which the tea and sugar were packed. They polished up the sixpenny-bits to make them look like new. When the old

people began to arrive, they welcomed them and queued them up in the order of their coming. Then they carried to each their Christmas present from the table where grandma sat, assigning the gifts, and checking off the names on her list, and received the quaint and beautiful blessings of God's poor in return. On Christmas Eve night a large blessed candle was lighted and placed in the drawing-room window to greet the Christ Child and light Him on His way as He passed by, and to tell Him that there was "room in the inn," and a welcome, if He would deign to enter.

At last, heavy-eyed and weary-limbed with the excitement and exertions of the day, the two boys retired to bed, and in spite of the gallant resolve to keep awake and see Santa Claus come down the chimney with his sack of Christmas-boxes and fill their stockings left hanging from the bedposts, they were quickly fast asleep. A moment later (so it seemed to them), and Christmas Day had come! Soon they were on their way to early Mass with father and mother, and brothers and sisters, trudging through the snow at times with the bright stars above, or better still, with white flakes falling on them and turning them into small snow men. Then the church bright and festive with its lights and flowers and Christmas decorations; the large, devout congregation with its hushed reverent stillness at the solemn moments of the Mass; the people pressing to the altar-rails to receive the Bread of Life, the two youngest being the only members of the family not yet privileged to do so; the Adeste and the sweet Christmas hymns; the wonders of the Crib with the Infant Jesus lying in the manger with outstretched arms of love and welcome, His Virgin Mother and St. Joseph on their knees in silent worship, the adoring shepherds, and the ox and ass tempering the winter's chill air with their warm breath and giving their Creator ungrudging welcome

But the most exciting and jolliest part of the day came

when the family had returned from early Mass, and Christmas-boxes were given and received. With trembling expectancy fastenings of parcels were quickly cut through and paper torn off, and then exclamations of wonder and delight and shouts of joy proclaimed that longed-for, and even seemingly impossible, presents had indeed arrived. So excited were the youngsters that repeated peals of the breakfast-bell were needed to gather them round the table, where a coveted privilege of Christmas, breakfast in the parlour with the family, awaited them. Laughter and gay chatter went on while the plates heaped high with good things were cleared. Excitement rose again to fever-pitch when the postman was seen coming up the drive with the Christmas-letters and fresh presents. He was met at the door by the boys with cries of welcome and the Season's greetings, and was presented with his Christmas-box which sent him on his rounds again with a lighter step. The morning wore on while Christmas-gifts were tried out, or proudly displayed to all who would admire, until time came for Last Mass and a second visit to the Crib. The Christmas-dinner with its turkey and ham and roast beef, and plum-pudding, blazing in blue and yellow flames, followed by songs and music and games in the drawing-room, with the thrills of the drawing for the prizes on the Christmas Tree, were a fitting ending to a memorable day. Truly Christmas Day was a blessed and happy day, which should appear more often in the Church's calendar! So, at least, thought Charlie and Willie.