

CHRISTMAS EVE IN NAPLES

THE Zampognari have come down from their homes in the Abruzzi mountains and day in, day out, the sound of their pipes remind us that Christmas is coming. The soft wailing tunes of the reed and skin pipes are faithful descendants of those the shepherds played in the country round Nazareth on the first Birthday, and few are the houses in Naples where the players are not invited to enter and play the song that tells us of what took place on that "still and holy night."

It is difficult for those who come from Northern homes to dissociate Christmas from snow and ice, blazing firesides and red-berried holly. Here, the brilliant sun in a sapphire sky is surely more truly reminiscent of the first Christmas Day.

All the world over, alas, old traditions and old legends are vanishing, and Naples is no exception to this rule; one by one the old customs are being swallowed up by modern matter-of-fact life. The few that remain, however, are quaint and interesting, and a stroll round the city on the days immediately preceding the Festival is well worth while, especially after dusk. The dim lit churches are crowded with men, women and children paying a visit to the "Crib" which is to be found in every church, all thoughtfully and lovingly designed, and in some cases brought to a perfection of detail and realism. Little children are lifted in their mother's arms to kiss the tiny waxen feet of the Christ Child, veiled—often with scattered rose petals or some price-less filmy lace—until midnight, when, at the opening words of the Mass, the veil is removed and the candles or tiny electric lights which illuminate the Manger and the figures of Our Lady and St. Joseph, are lighted. The broad incline of Santa Brigida still has its wonderful fish stalls and great tubs of eels, from which, occasionally, an occupant will escape and slither rapidly across the pavement, to the embarrassment of pedestrians.

There is a street of "Old Naples," a long narrow street that "cleaves like an arrow's flight" through the close

## CHRISTMAS EVE IN NAPLES

packed houses, where but few visitors go unless it be to give a cursory glance down its long straight length, remembering that the Via dei Tribunali to-day gives the best idea of what Pompei must have been 2,000 years ago. Here one is at the heart of the city where the strong pulse of life throbs as eagerly as in the days when this part was the centre of Roman Naples. It is interesting at any time, this main artery of the ancient city; it is more especially worth a visit at Christmas, when dusk has fallen, and the grim narrow street is a blaze of light and colour. Every shop is made twice its usual size by the simple expedient of stretching an awning over a portion of the pavement and spreading stalls beneath it. In the archway of a great palazzo, majestic even yet despite the grime of centuries, a pile of oranges overflows its legitimate resting-place on the stall and falls in a golden cascade on to the grey paving-stones. Hard by a brilliant doorway bulges with huge boxes of maccheroni, of every size and shape and kind, shells and ribbons, long and short, thick and thin, pale cream masses on beds of royal blue paper. Overhead hang glistening bladders of lard like huge shiny snowballs and the boxes are flanked with cheeses, round and long, big and little, white, yellow and brown.

The little square before the church of the Gerolomini is almost filled with glossy green and yellow melons, and a few steps away a stall of red apples and luscious yellow pears stands cheek by jowl with large square net-covered hampers filled with unhappy looking chickens, and turkeys who blink philosophically at the crowd.

Handcarts laden with small tubs filled with large green and small black olives and pickled vegetables are pushed up and down by their owners, while a companion blows shrilly on a tin horn to attract attention. Should they stop for a moment, to pass the time of day with the buxom lady half hidden behind the pile of green branched-leaf broccoli—without which no Christmas Eve dinner table is complete—the cart is immediately surrounded by swarms of children intent on filching something from the tubs. They are driven off with good-humoured cuffs and the tin trumpet, and the cart proceeds on its way.

## BLACKFRIARS

But the glory of the show is the dried fruit. The shop proper spreads to at least three times its original size. The outer wall is transformed into a screen of figs, the square boxes arranged in a "mosaic" of tastefully blended shades of brown, the deep rich glossiness of the baked fig stuffed with almonds, and the paler shade of its sun-dried brother. The "mosaic" is bordered with long slim boxes of dates in crinkled blue, green and white paper, and green palm leaves form a fan-like frame to the whole. The stall beneath is a mass of every dried fruit that the heart can desire, and on the opposite side of the doorway a hundred or more neatly arranged sacks overflow with cobnuts, walnuts, chestnuts, Brazil nuts and every other nut.

The shop itself is small, hardly big enough to accommodate the proprietor and his wife who are generously proportioned. Their wares are all outside, but on the narrow wall facing the entrance a pretty life-sized statue of the Holy Infant rests in a bower of fresh flowers and green leaves, lit by tiny electric lamps.

It is all very pretty and wonderful. And everywhere there is the sound of music, a violin, a piano, unaccompanied voices singing, or the wail of the Zampognari playing the Novena of the Birth of Christ.

The hours move on towards midnight. The crowds melt away, the streets are deserted, but the churches are full. And above in the serene sapphire sky the stars appear in their millions, flinging far and wide over this weary world of ours the old, old message of peace and good will.

G. S.