

St. Nicolas and similar customs in Swizerland

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ST NICHOLAS AND SIMILAR CUSTOMS IN SWITZERLAND

The birthday of the Saint Nicholas falls on 6th December. Traditionally, this opens the Christmas season, although Christians celebrate the last four weeks before Christmas, the time of Advent. In many homes and Churches, a fir wreath carrying four candles is put up on the first Sunday in Advent, and as the four Sundays before Christmas come along, one, two, three and finally four candles are lit. For the children, St. Nicholas is a very important person, but he is hardly the gay, red-robed figure of Father Christmas in the British Isles and elsewhere. He is sombre and is supposed to make certain that the children have behaved and deserve the presents which the Christ-Child will bring at Christmas. He brings nuts and fruit and some Santa Claus honeycakes. For the naughty children he leaves a birch.

In Fribourg, the Cathedral bears his name, and a popular Mass is sung in his honour early in December, followed by a pageant. In many Swiss towns, special ceremonies take place. At Kuessnacht/Rigi, the citizens organise a rather odd and fascinating hunt for St. Nicholas. The *Sternsingen* is a custom in Lucerne, at Rheinfelden, and Rapperswil, when children dressed as the Wise Men and carrying the illuminated Star of Bethlehem, sing carols and hymns.

Many old customs are connected with St. Stephen's Day on 26th December and New Year's Eve. At Scuol (Schuls) in the Lower Engadine, the schoolboys parade from door to door and visit their girl companions. They shout "Dà a mai". (Give it to me), and with it is meant the *Pan grond*, the big loaf or pear loaf which every girl hands to the boy of her choice. For the coming festivities, the boys thus chosen are the girls' escorts. Later in the

afternoon, the boys and girls, together with their masters, are invited to a *Zvieri* at one of the parents' homes where the *Pan grond* is eaten and cocoa drunk. Later the boys have to take the girls as passengers on toboggans and sleighs.

At Herisau, the "Chläusler" is the big pre-Christmas market. Every week throughout the year, it is a cattle, fruit and vegetable market, but before Christmas, the market becomes the most colourful bazaar where everything under the sun is put up for sale. Herisau has known this market since 1537, sixty years before the Canton was divided into two Half-Cantons.

The people of the Canton of Appenzell know two New Year's Eves, the old one according to St. Gregory on 13th January and the new one which is customary in all Europe. On 31st December, the good and attractive spirits called "Silvesterkläuse" make the rounds. On 13th January, however, the bad spirits roam the streets, older and of pagan origin. They carry large bells and are adorned with fantastic headgear and masks.

The old year is "rung out" and the new year "rung in" in many parts of Switzerland. The bells which resound in full unison at other times, even on ordinary weekdays, are a characteristic feature on special holidays, and Christmas and New Year are two of them. Their powerful chimes slowly blend into one symphonic concert, and they carry a message of hope and glory around the country. In parts of the Valais, a bell-ringing competition is held on Christmas Eve. After Midnight Mass, everybody gathers round the family table to eat "Ringli", outsize doughnuts, and to drink hot chocolate.

(Compiled from items received through "Swiss Journal" San Francisco, S.N.T.O. and other sources.)