

Christmas in the Old Days and Now

By Rev. REGINALD H. STARR, D.D.



LL the world keeps Christmas day. From the land of the midnight sun to the sunny south of perpetual summer is a far cry. But in the long distance there is no land where Christmas is not kept. Its celebration is a part of the universal history of the human race.

Whatever may have been its origin and whatever peculiarities may have gathered about it in its adaptation to different people and different circumstances, it is to us Americans to-day a practically national feast.

To keep it was at one time, and in our own part of the country, it is true, a penal offense. It was thought to savor of proclivity and to foster unpleasant memories of political servitude. But it has grown with our growth and the broad-mindedness of the American people is seen at its best in the hearty commemoration of the nativity of the Christ from year to year.

In some parts of the country, in fact, Christmas day bids fair to supplant Thanksgiving day, and it certainly may already claim an equality of recognition with the time-honored national festival of our New England forbears. People of every creed and every nationality within our borders delight to participate in the celebration of the Christmas feast, and many a scion of old-world stock finds himself back home again as the church bells peal and the candles glimmer on the Christmas trees. It is a time of universal peace and good will. It brightens homes, softens asperities and uplifts us as it brings "the light that never was on land or sea."

The Origin Unknown.

The origin of the festival is said to be lost in antiquity. If, as held by many, it is a Christian feast grafted on to a pagan one, its history is age long. The actual institution of Christmas as the celebration of the nativity of Jesus Christ dates from the second century of the Christian era. St. Chrysostom says that it was observed from the beginning, according to western practice, from Thrace to the Straits of Gibraltar, and he calls it "the most venerable, the mother of all the rest."

But as to the time of the celebration there was a diversity of observance. The early Christian church naturally kept Easter as commemorative of the resurrection of Christ, which the apostles were especially chosen and instructed to proclaim, and the feast of Pentecost, which became the birthday of the church, came next in order. Then to these were added two others, the one commemorative of the baptism of Jesus Christ and the other of his birth. The first of these, the Epiphany, or Manifestation, came from the east to the west. The second, Christmas, or the nativity, came from the west to the east. The two were officially recognized and quite widely kept in both the east and west in the fourth century. In a sermon preached by the Golden-Mouthed in Antioch on December 25, A. D. 386, he speaks of the festival of Christmas as having first become known there 10 years before and on another occasion he invites his hearers to participate in its approaching observance.

But as to the reason for the selection of December 25 as Christmas day, first arrived at by the Hippolytes, there is much difference of opinion. It is held by some that the German name of the festival "Weihnacht," is a literal translation of the Hebrew "Chanuka," the Jewish festival of the purification of the temple by Judas Maccabeus, which begins on December 17, and that as the Passover and Pentecost were perpetuated in Easter and Whitsuntide, so the festival of the Purification has been preserved in Christmastide and the practice of burning candles on the Christmas trees has come from the old Hebrew feast.

Early Festivals.

But the Purification can hardly be numbered among the greater and important festivals of the Hebrews and, as Schaff says, there is really no Old Testament feast corresponding to our Christmas. The weight of opinion as to the time of year chosen by the Christian church in the west lies in another and entirely different solution of the question and links the Christian observance to the ancient practice of the heathen world.

It must be remembered in this connection that the particular date was first fixed upon by the Roman branch of the church, and at that season of the year a series of pagan festivals occurred which were closely interwoven with the civil and social life of the Roman people. These festivals had an import which lent itself to the growth of the Christian faith, and they may have been spiritually adopted by the church in order to counteract their evil tendencies and at the same time advance the cause of the new religion.

The Saturnalia, for instance, represented the peaceful times of the golden age and abolished sharp distinctions between citizen and serf. But it was a time of wild and unholly revelry. Then the Brumalia—the feast of the shortest day, or winter solstice—was the commemoration of the birthday of the new sun about to return to the earth. It was the "dies natalis invicti solis." It is the old mythology of the sun worshippers that was the birthday of Mithras himself, and, in fact, the time of year when from unnumbered ages before the Chris-

tian era pagan Europe, in all its tribes and peoples, had celebrated its chief festival. So here we have the double truth of the golden age and the rebirth of the unconquered sun, as he breaks the power of darkness, refined and enriched in the Christian teaching of "peace on earth and good will to men," as coincident with the rising of the Sun of Righteousness in the birth into the world of the son of the peasant woman who was also the Son of God.

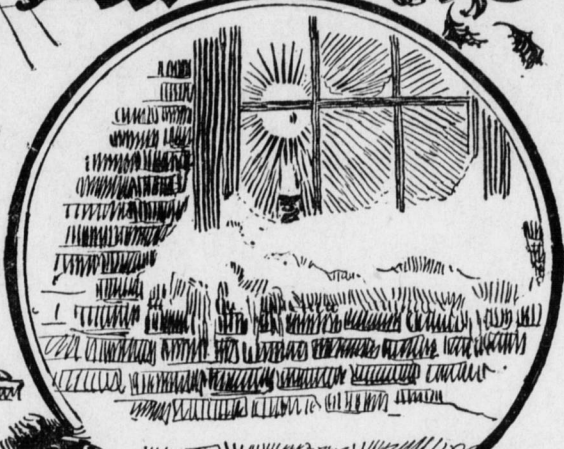
This view of Christmas accentuates the true place of the Christian religion in relation to the ancient and deep-seated religions which preceded it, and at the same time reveals a beauty of development in its culmination as the completed manifestation of God to man. In the infancy of the race the winter solstice was everywhere a season of rejoicing. No matter what the peculiar form which it assumed, it expressed the world joy of the time. So the very idea of the Child God which gives Christmas its meaning may not only have been foretold by sybil and seer and prophet, but prefigured by the infant gods of the Greek and Egyptian and Hindu and Buddhist forms of religion.

These to us imperfect and unsatisfactory conceptions of the Divine may have been the rude but honest efforts of the earlier days of the human race to group the idea of a God-man which has been made so real and so full of joy to us in the Nativity and the Epiphany of the Christ. In this sense the early church may have been wiser than she wot of. Her aim was to select the best features of the heathen feasts and embody them for their purification in Christian practices and sacred rites and to wean the converts from their old superstitions to the deeper and more real truths of the Christian faith.

But in so doing she may have been the unconscious instrument of a divinely guided evolution in religious practice and belief which has ennobled and enriched the world. The symbolism of our Christmas to-day certainly lends itself in many ways to this point of view. In the greenery with which we deck our houses and churches and in the gift-laden fir trees which gladden our children's hearts, we still retain the symbols by which our heathen forefathers signified their faith in the power of returning sun to clothe the earth with green and hang new fruit on the trees. The Christmas carol may be a new birth of the hymns of the Saturnalia. The holly and mistletoe came from the Druid



THE WASSAIL BOWL OF SWIMMING ROASTED APPLES.



IN AUSTRIA CANDLES ARE SET IN THE WINDOWS

NECHT RUPRECHT WITH HIS JINGLING BELLS.

worship. The banquet time itself may be a survival, purified and refined, of the original feast to the gods and goddesses of the fabled Olympus. The "Yule" of "Merrie England" is the old Teutonic name of the religious festival of the winter solstice, during which Celt and Roman could trace the movements of their deities as they walked abroad in the world.

The Story Christmas Tells.

The Christian religion is not merely something built over the old ethnic religions as the church of St. Maria Sopra Minerva in Rome is built over the ruins of the old heathen temple of Minerva, or as the grove sacred to Adonis was planted by the order of the Emperor Hadrian over "the cave close to the village" which is now honored as the scene of the Saviour's birth. It had a larger and a deeper meaning. Christmas tells the story of a gradual but complete unfolding of the divine idea of religion as seen in the Christ Child, of its worship and its merry-making in its at once sacred and social feast.

The story is told simply but graphically by two of the four evangelists. St. Mark's gospel begins with the baptism of the Christ, so logically he had no need to tell the story of his birth and boyhood. St. John wrote near the close of the first century, and with the dominant idea of setting forth the divinity of Christ in opposition to the prevailing gnosti-

clism of the time. But St. Matthew, whose narrative bears traces of having been gleaned from Joseph and St. Luke, who probably got his information from Mary, have given us the story with a directness and a humaneness which the grotesque and often meretricious wonder-tales of the apocryphal gospels have but served to accentuate as a dark background to a touching and reverent picture.

Around the story legends naturally gathered. It was the custom in early days to decorate in this way the graves of heroes and some of these legends are no doubt the offspring of the "vulgar tattle" of the apocryphal gospel stories. In some parts of the world the bees are said to sing on Christmas eve. The cattle kneel in honor of the manger-bed at Bethlehem. The sheep go in procession in commemoration of the angels' visit to the shepherds. The Indians creep through the winter woods of Canada to see the deer kneel and look up to the Great Spirit. In the German Alps the cattle are thought to have the gift of language, and the story is told of an Alpine farmer's servant who hid in the stable on Christmas eve and heard the horses talking about his own death, which followed a few days later.

A Bosnian Legend.

There is a Bosnian legend that the sun leaps in the heavens and the stars dance around it. A great peace comes stealing down over mountain and forest. The rotten stumps stand straight and green on the hillside. The grass is befloored with blossoms and the birds sing on the mountain tops in thanks to God. In Poland the heavens open and Jacob's ladder is set up between earth and sky. In Austria the candles are set in the window, that the Christ Child may not stumble when he comes to bless the home. In north Germany the tables are spread and the lights left burning for the Virgin Mary and her attending angel.

The English superstition is admirably voiced by the myriad-minded Shakespeare in "Hamlet":
Some say that ever 'gainst that season comes
Wherein our Lord's birth is celebrated,
The bird of heaven singeth all night long,
And then they say no spirit can walk abroad,
The nights are wholesome. Then no planets strike,
No fairy takes, nor witch hath power to charm,
So hallow'd and so gracious is the time."

If a man will compliment his wife upon her youthful appearance and tell her that he loves her, she will forgive other white lies.

Origin of the Oldest Christmas Hymn

IN EVERY Roman Catholic church and in probably ninety-and-nine out of every hundred Protestant churches throughout Christendom this is the season when is heard that grand old hymn whose tender and solemn strains find an echo in the universal human heart—"Adeste Fideles" (Come, All Ye Faithful). It is the anthem sung at high mass at Christmastide for centuries past, calling Christ's worshippers to Bethlehem, where the new-born Saviour lies.

This naive and beautiful Latin anthem is more ancient than its history, and goes back six or seven centuries. Saint Bonaventura, an Italian monk of the thirteenth century, who died in Lyons, France, in 1274, is credited with the authorship of the beginning:

Adeste fideles,
Laeti triumphantes,
Venite, venite in Bethlehem.
Natum videte, Regem angelorum.

Venite adoremus,
Venite adoremus,
Venite adoremus Dominum.

Oh, come all ye faithful,
Joyful and triumphant,
Oh, come ye, oh, come ye to Bethlehem.
See the new-born Saviour, king of all the angels.

Oh, come let us adore him,
Oh, come let us adore him,
Oh, come let us adore him, Christ, our Lord.
Saint Bonaventura was a Franciscan scholastic philo-

sopher, and was surnamed "Doctor Seraphicus." His preserved writings are of a dogmatic or didactic nature exclusively, and this hymn is not to be found among them. Doubtless it is to be referred to the seraphic side of his genius and temperament. Its classic Latin cadences are of such lyric felicity that one cannot help but believe they were written to the noble and touching melody on whose wings they have floated to our time. Surely this is not too fantastic a suggestion, when it is remembered that the original Greek music of the Delphic hymn to Apollo is preserved intact, and that certain familiar phrases of the Gregorian chant, used to-day in the Roman mass, are identified by Hebrew historians as the same which were sung in Solomon's temple many centuries before the time of Christ.

The hymn "Adeste Fideles" is not known to have been used in England earlier than the seventeenth century. The musical setting, as we have it in modern notation, is ascribed by Novello to one John Reading, who was organist at Winchester cathedral from 1675 to 1681, and later at Winchester college. Its real origin is lost in the mists of antiquity which probably far antedates the middle ages and the Latin verses to which it has been inseparably wedded.

Word-language reaches but the one people or race to whom it is directly addressed. But the language of music is universal—it is "understanded of the people" instantly all the wide world over—it needs not to be written in choice Latin nor translated into many tongues—it is caught up from the heart and echoes on forever. That is why the "Adeste Fideles" has become the Christmas hymn of all the world.

SOME IDEAS FOR DECORATIONS

How to Make the Home Look Bright and Cheerful for the Holidays.

In massing holly for use on the Christmas table it repays one to wipe off the leaves with a cloth dipped in a very little olive oil, says the Housekeeper. Tall candles should light the feast and the holly leaves reflect the twinkling lights in a beautiful manner. If a chandelier hangs over the dining table a feature which will delight the children is to have a nosegay of artificial flowers suspended from the chandelier to within a foot of the table by means of a red ribbon. This bouquet should have the paper puff of the old-time fashion, and the bouquet itself will be found to be a shower bouquet, one small nosegay for each person, in the depths of which some trifling gift is hidden.

Snowballs of cotton, tightly wound with white ribbon, also conceal gifts most attractively, while the cheap but pretty little Santa Claus candy boxes, for sale at favor shops, are effective upon the Christmas table, and will hold quite a good-sized package, or, of course, may be used to hold the bonbons for which they are intended. For a luncheon or high tea during Christmas week, a beautiful table may be set by employing the use of green linen runners embroidered in white. A holly bell or a bunch of red carnations in a cut-glass vase will touch the center of the table to brilliancy and soft garlands of southern moss may lightly edge the linen runners, or dollies if they be used instead.

The colonial glass candlesticks are still in favor, and nothing is more attractive in a country house. With tall green or red tapers, a group of these candlesticks placed in a mass of holly as a centerpiece is both appropriate and beautiful.

A quaint little Christmas tree may be used as a centerpiece by procuring at the florist's a little "pepper plant," which has lovely green leaves and red berries. Wound with glittering tinsel and tied with candied fruits held in place with wee baby ribbons, or hung with little favors of French jewelry or articles of trifling worth, the little tree makes a centerpiece of charm.

"THE PRINCE OF PEACE"

His Wonderful Influence Continues and Widens Through the World.

All the old troublous questions of the origin and destination of the Gallie Carpenter have passed, notes a writer in Collier's. All the mediaeval worriment in discriminating between human and divine has gone, all the puzzled inquiry into the miraculous. No longer is mankind stirred over the non-essential. Theories of him fade away, dogmas of his nature lose their charm. His gentleness has conquered. His influence continues and widens. Slowly brightening, the gleam that touched him spreads through the world. His spirit moves on the face of civilization, and makes it kinder every generation. The touch of his hand is on the grief-stricken. Nurse, physician, and nun are the messengers of his teaching. The vestal fires burned out, but never the fires of his spirit, which answer each other from mountain-top to mountain-top across the continents. And deep in the heart of the people they make family life sweeter and ease the bitterness of failure and ignorance and all life's incompleteness. That wonder-working personality was never so potent as to-day—so insistent and tenderly sure. Under a thousand forms, creeds and names, men serve him. And however far we go in the conquest of nature, identifying the north pole, climbing the sky, prying open electrical forces, mapping out the subliminal, diminishing sin, disease, war, poverty, ignorance—always in the advance will be that gracious figure of the Sinless One, who showed Love as the rule of life. One Perfect Man—ardent and gentle—the race will never tire of him.

BY SIZES



Some people expect so much more than others.—Life.

Origin of Gift-Giving. It is believed by many that our custom of giving gifts at Christmas comes from an old custom of priests putting on board of all outgoing ships a box of alms. This box was opened at Christmas-time, and masses said for the giving of alms, and it was called a "Christ Mass" box. From this has come our custom of giving boxes and gifts.

The Man in the Moon. Russian folk-lore tells that the man in the moon was one who was seeking the isle in which there is no death. At last, after traveling far, he found the loaged-for haven and took up his abode in the moon. After a hundred years had passed, death called for him one Christmas eve and a fierce struggle ensued with the moon, who was victorious; and so the man stayed where he was.

