

# Christmas Carols



By ELMO SCOTT WATSON  
Drawing by Ray Walters.

ONE of the interesting developments of the celebration of Christmas in America is the revival of the ancient custom of singing Christmas carols on Christmas eve and the increasing observance of that custom in all parts of the country. Of course, we have always had some Christmas carol singing, varying in prevalence in different parts of the country and confined mainly to the Christmas exercises in church and school by the children just before the holiday. But in the hurry and haste of this modern high-speed age and our departure in many respects from the old forms of observing the day, the singing of carols is one custom which has been allowed to lapse to a great extent.

It is interesting to note, however, that the Christmas carol is "staging a come-back" and that in places where its appearance seems all the more surprising because it is in the very center of our modern commercialism. In many of the big department stores in the large cities, in hotels and in restaurants groups of musicians, dressed in the costumes of Old England, are playing and singing Christmas carols during the week before Christmas. In some of the railroad stations in the big cities hurrying commuters and other railway travelers are surprised to hear the sound of voices, singing old-fashioned Christmas carols, pealing out through the cathedral-like spaces of these great structures and upon pausing for a moment they see that the singing comes from a balcony overlooking the concourse and that it is a trained choir of many voices which is thus adding to the Christmas spirit in evidence everywhere.

The first Christmas carol is said to be that sung by the heavenly host when the birth of Christ was announced to the shepherds. Here is a description of that singing as told by St. Luke:

"There were in the same country shepherds abiding in the field, keeping watch over their flocks by night. And, lo, the angel of the Lord came upon them, and the glory of the Lord shone round about them; and they were sore afraid. And the angel said unto them, Fear not; for, behold, I bring you good tidings of great joy, which shall be to all people. For unto you is born this day in the city of David a Savior, which is Christ the Lord. And this shall be a sign unto you; ye shall find the babe wrapped in swaddling clothes, lying in a manger. And suddenly there was with the angel a multitude of the heavenly host praising God, and singing, Glory to God in the highest, and on earth peace, good will toward men."

Probably the practice of singing at Christmas rose in imitation of this, as the majority of the carols declare the good tidings of great joy. The word "carol" itself comes from two Latin words meaning "to sing joyfully." Or as it was defined long ago in a curious old stanza:

"Know you what is a carol?  
'Tis singing, with praise of God  
If you praise God and sing not,  
You utter no carol.  
If you sing and praise not God,  
You utter no carol.  
If you praise anything which does not appertain  
To the praise of God,  
Though, in singing, you praise,  
You utter no carol."

It is a curious fact that the singing of carols, like many of our other Christmas customs, owes something to a pagan as well as a Christian origin. The early church found that all pagan religions celebrated the birth of a new year. The Druids gathered mistletoe on what is our day of Christmas, the Romans held their saturnalia, the Persians held agricultural ceremonies, as did the Chinese.

Theophilus, bishop of Caesarea, toward the middle of the Second century, recommended "the observance of the birthday of our Lord on what day soever the 25th of December shall happen." There follows a definite statement that the first official carol was "Gloria in Excelsis Deo" and the year in which it was sung on the new date was 129 A. D. Thus the church was able to profit from the mood of merriment created by the pagans. The spirit of joy from many religions was merged into that of one.

Many high churches in the ancient times opposed the introduction of song into the solemn moments. No power, however, could stem the tide of innocent song which had invaded religious observance. The first crusade preached by Urban in 1095 gave impetus to the troubadour movement and the holidays for five centuries were to resound with the songs of their inspiration. By 1500 carol singing was widespread in Europe and was being introduced into England.

In the England of today wandering bands of minstrels or "waits" preserve the old customs by going from house to house piping Christmas tunes on reed instruments and singing carols. It may be this that they sing: "Wassail, wassail! to our town! The bowl is white, and the ale is brown;

The bowl is made of the rosemary tree, And so is the ale, of the good barley. Little maid, little maid, tiri the pin! Open the door, and let us come in!" Or they may lift up their voices in this equally old carol: "Here us comes a wassailing, under the holly green, Here us comes a wandering, so merry to be seen, Good luck good Master Hodgkin, and kind Mistress also, And all the little children that round the table go! Your pockets full of money, your cupboards full of good cheer, A merry Christmas, Guizzards, and a Happy New Year!"

The poor women and children also sing carols on the streets and are given cakes by those who listen. Some of the carol singers carry peaked lanterns to light them on their way. The bringing in of the Yule log in Eng-

land was the occasion of a joyous ceremony and the singing of merry songs, such as the "Boar's Head" carol, still sung at Oxford at Christmas which goes as follows:

"The boar's head in hand bear I  
Bedeckt with bays and rosemary;  
And I pray you, my masters, be merry  
Quot estis in convivio  
Caput apris deferro  
Reddens laudes Domino!"

"Our steward hath provided this  
In honor of the King of Bliss,  
Which on this day to be served is,  
In Regiments Atrio  
Caput apris deferro  
Reddens laudes Domino!"

Almost every land has its own Christmas carols. They are called Wiegenslieder or Kristlieder in Germany, Noels in France, and carols in England. In Russia, the ancient Kolyada songs, once sung to pagan gods, now dedicated to the Christian saints, are sung about the streets.

It is to Austria, however, that we are indebted for one of our best known of all Christmas songs. For "Silent Night" had its origin in a simple pre-Christmas party to which a young priest, Joseph Mohr, was invited in Oberndorf, near Salzburg, Austria, in 1818. At Oberndorf it was the custom shortly before Christmas for wandering comedians from the near-by village of Laufen to give crude representations of the Christmas story as recounted in the Bible. A shipowner named Maier invited Joseph Mohr, young assistant priest who had recently come to the village from Salzburg, to be his guest at a little party. As a special surprise for the priest, Maier arranged for the comedians from Laufen to stage their festival play at his home.

The thoughtful hospitality of the Maier couple and the touching simplicity of the festival play so stirred the young priest that instead of going straightway home he climbed the so-called "Totenberg" (mountain of the dead), overlooking Oberndorf, and stood there in silent meditation.

The silence of the night, the blinking of the stars, the murmur of the Salzach river all inspired him. Quickly he descended to his parish house, and late that night the words to "Stille Nacht" were written.

The next day he hurried to his chum and co-worker, Franz Gruber, village organist and school teacher. He requested his friend to write the music for his song. Happy at this opportunity, Gruber composed the melody that is known perhaps to more people than any other single melody.

Christmas eve of 1818 came and the priest and the teacher were ready to offer the song for the first time. Unfortunately the organ of St. Nicola was out of commission that night. For a moment it seemed as though the congregation were to be cheated out of this unique premiere. But Gruber ran back to his home and got his guitar. To its accompaniment Mohr and Gruber then sang "Stille Nacht" for the first time as a duet.

(By Western Newspaper Union.)

## Hope for Restoration of Isle to Fertility

A representative of the United States Department of Agriculture has spent the past summer at Laysan Island, a lonely spot in the Pacific ocean, about 1,000 miles northwest of Honolulu. Laysan Island formerly had extensive guano beds, but these were worked out more than a decade ago. Commercial fertilizers from South America and the cost of handling the lower grade guano made the Laysan Islands no longer profitable. So the guano station on the lonely islet was abandoned and the regular trips of supply schooners to Honolulu were discontinued. Left at Laysan were only a fast-growing family of rabbits that soon virtually denuded the island of its scant vegetation, while the wild Pacific winds heaped sand dunes over the roots of the herbage. Doctor Wilder hopes, however, that Laysan can be transformed into a well-vegetated island. Plants and grass suitable to its coral soil were taken in boxes on the Pioneer. Two officers, two men, a cook and Doctor Wilder landed at Laysan and started work.

## The Music Critic

Harry Harkness Flagler, president of the New York symphony orchestra, said at a dinner: "Music criticism is a difficult art. Too many music critics are like the young man who said: 'You play beautifully, Miss Smith. There is one thing about your technique that impresses me particularly.' 'Yes?' said Miss Smith. 'Is it my touch you mean?' 'No,' said the young man. 'It is your marvelous speed in turning the leaf when you get to the bottom of the page.'"

## Mohammedan Holy Book

In the Arabic language the word "Koran" signifies "the reading."

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## Historic Monument to French Hero in Danger

News from Paris states that there is a possibility that the citadel of the little town of Blaye in southwestern France may be taken off the official list of historic monuments, and that the destruction of its ruins will follow. Here Charlemagne buried Roland, who had died in defense of the great king's rearguard at Roncesvalles. Roland's great ivory horn, which he sounded—too late—to bring Charlemagne to the support of his rearguard, is a famous legend. Roland's own sword is shown at Nuremberg; the warrior himself was interred at Blaye. In the famous "Song of Roland," the ancient poem that tells the heroic tale, Roland is depicted as a national hero, who resisted the attacks of the Saracens. The true Roland was a warden of the Breton marches, who died fighting against the Basques, when in 778 they attacked and defeated Charlemagne's rearguard at Roncesvalles in the Pyrenees. The citadel at Blaye was built in the Seventeenth century by Sebastien Vauban, the great French military engineer, who was responsible for most of the fortifications of France that were constructed during his lifetime.

## Record Telephone Call Sent Over the Oceans

The longest commercial telephone call on record, from Sedalia, Mo., to Sydney, Australia, was announced by the American Telephone & Telegraph company as having been made through its new overseas telephone service. The connection covered a distance of more than 15,000 miles. Due to the time difference between the two points the speaker in Australia talked at about 2:00 a. m. on a recent Tuesday morning, while his words reached the listener at Sedalia, a fraction of a second later, at 10:00 a. m. Monday, there.

## Cycle of Hard Luck

Over a period of about a year here is what has happened to ten-year-old Leland Luenberger, of Gouverneur, N. Y.: Severe cut on his knee playing football, forced to remain in hospital for two weeks; injured in automobile accident and returned to bed; was forced back to bed with measles; while suffering from this disease he contracted the mumps and scarlet fever; recovered and incurred bad cut on his foot while on vacation. Now he is confined to an easy chair until that wound heals.

## Rebuked

Little Paul had adopted Lindbergh as his hero for all time. "Why do you make so much of Lindbergh?" his mother asked him one day. "Why shouldn't I?" demanded Paul. "I bet you was just as excited about Columbus, when he discovered America."

## Veterans' Hospitals

According to the United States veterans' bureau, the bureau utilizes 93 government owned or controlled hospitals, of which 49 are under the direct control of the bureau. The total number of ex-service men admitted to hospitals to July 1, 1929, was 429,620, and the total number of patients remaining in all hospitals on that date was 27,784, of whom 6,517 were tuberculosis patients, 13,781 neuro-psychiatric cases and 7,456 general and surgical cases.

## Matter of Time

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