

A Christmas Potpourri



U. S. ARMY SIGNAL CORPS PICTORIAL SERVICE



By ELMO SCOTT WATSON



HARRIS & EWING

A Visit from St. Nicholas

Twas the night before Christmas, when all through the house
Not a creature was stirring, not even a mouse
The stockings were hung by the chimney with care,
In hope that St. Nicholas soon would be there
The children were nestled all snug in their beds
While visions of sugar-plum danced in their heads
And Mamma in her 'kerchief, and 'Papa in his cap,
Had just settled our brains for a long winter's nap,
When out on the lawn there arose such a clatter,
I sprang from the bed to see what was the matter
Away to the window I flew like a flash,
To open the shutters and throw up the sash
The moon on the breast of the new-fallen snow
Gave the lustre of mid-day to objects below
When, what to my wondering eyes should appear,
First so mine own dear, and eight tiny reindeer,
With a little old driver, so lively and quick,
I knew in a moment it must be St. Nick.

More rapid than eagles his courses they trace,
And his whistling, and shouting, and calling them by name
"Now, Dasher! now, Dancer! now, Prancer and Vixen!
Now, Comet! now, Cupid! now, Dunder and Blixen!
To the top of the porch! to the top of the wall!
Now dash away! dash away! dash away all!"
As they leaped like fire, the wild horses' fire,
When they met with an obstacle, pranced to the sky,
So up to the house-top the course they flew,
With the pligh full of Toys, and St. Nicholas too
And then, in a twinkling, I heard on the roof
The prancing and pawing of each little hoof—
As I drew in my head, and was turning around,
Down the chimney St. Nicholas came with a bound
He was dressed all in fur, from his head to his foot,
And his clothes were all trimmed with white ermine;
A bundle of Toys he had flung on his back,
And he looked like a peddler just opening his pack.
His eyes-how they twinkled! his dimples how merry!
His cheeks were like roses, his nose like a cherry!
His droll little mouth was drawn up like a bow,
And the beard of his chin was as white as the snow;
The stump of a pipe he held tight in his teeth,
And the smoke it curled round, like a friendly caress;
He had a broad face and a jovial little belly,
That shook when he laughed, like a bowlful of jelly.
He was chubby and plump, a right jolly old elf,
And I laughed when I saw him, in spite of myself.
A wink of his eye and a twist of his head,
Soon gave me to know I had nothing to dread.
He spoke not a word, but went straight to his work,
And filled all the stockings; then turned with a jerk,
And laying his finger aside of his nose,
And giving a nod, up the chimney he rose;
He sprang to his sleigh, to his team gave a whistle,
And away they all flew like the down of a willow,
But I heard him exclaim, ere he drove out of sight,
"Happy Christmas to all, and to all a good night!"

1.—A queer version of Santa Claus and his reindeer—members of the United States army engineer battalion, stationed in Grenada, Nicaragua, rehearse their parts for the Christmas festivities.

2.—"Merry Christmas!" from Mary Christmas. For that is her name and she lives in South Boston, Mass., with her husband and children and she is just as jolly as her name suggests.

3.—An essential part of the Christmas celebration in the Nation's Capital—President and Mrs. Hoover in front of the community Christmas tree which blazes with light when the Chief Executive presses the button to inaugurate this part of the impressive Christmas program.

At the right: A copy of a famous Christmas poem, "A Visit From St. Nicholas," in the handwriting of its author, Clement C. Moore.

IT WAS just 90 years ago that there was written a Christmas poem which has become world famous. On Christmas eve, 1822, Dr. Clement C. Moore, a professor of Hebrew in the General Theological seminary, in New York city, dashed off for his daughters some verses to which he gave the title of "A Visit From St. Nicholas," but which are better known to most people under the title of the first line—"Twas the Night before Christmas—"

Tradition has it that Doctor Moore got the idea of writing the poem while on the way on foot to New York—three miles distant from Chelsea village—to purchase an extra turkey for the Christmas dinner. As he trudged the lonely country road beneath the stars the lines were born and when he arrived at his house in what is now West Twenty-third street he shut himself into his study and wrote the immortal stanzas. The poem was read to his delighted children in the kitchen of the rambling house.

Months later, a young girl visited the Moores. She had Professor Moore copy the poem in her album. Without telling the Moores of her action she showed the poem to the editor of a Troy (N. Y.) newspaper. The next Christmas the editor published the poem anonymously. It was immediately copied throughout the country, and to the great astonishment of the author he realized that he was famous.

It is related that this turn of fate irked the learned doctor for the most of his lifetime, and not until the time of his death did he accept the imposed role of author of the most beloved Christmas poem in the English language. Doctor Moore wrote also a Hebrew grammar, considered by scholars the best of its day. Curiously this erudite work has long since vanished while "A Visit From St. Nicholas" lives on from year to year.

Santa Claus is such a familiar figure that everyone takes it for granted that he has always looked just as we know him now. But the fact is that the Santa Claus we know had his origin in the word picture which Doctor Moore painted in his immortal poem and from that resulted a development in which two famous American artists played an important part.

Doctor Moore's poem was written in 1822, but it was not until 1840 that the first "portrait" of Santa Claus was printed. In a volume, now very scarce, of "The Poets of America," edited by John Keese, Doctor Moore's "A Visit From St. Nicholas" was included and for the first time it was illustrated with a picture of good old St. Nick. It shows him as a genial, bewhiskered old fellow wearing a cap in which is stuck a tall feather. What is perhaps a most remarkable fact about this portrait is that it shows him smoking a long slender pipe. But this is perfectly in keeping with Doctor Moore's original conception, for Moore once confessed that a certain portly, rubicund Dutchman living near his father's country seat, Chelsea, who was addicted to a pipe, was the original of his idea of the St. Nicholas in his poem. The name of the artist who drew this picture for Keese's volume is unknown so there is still a vacancy in the title of "first portrait painter of Santa Claus." But this unknown not only drew a portrait of the jolly old patron saint of Christmas, but he also showed him seated in his sled, driving his team of reindeer.

The world had to wait another 20 years, however, for another portrait of Santa Claus. In 1842 an edition of "A Visit From St. Nicholas," illustrated throughout by F. O. C. Darley, was published in New York. Darley gave us several views of the old fellow at work. One in particular was appropriate, for it showed Santa Claus placing his finger slyly to one side of his nose, just as his biographer, Doctor Moore, had described.

Darley's work was a step in advance. He probably was the foremost American illustrator at the time; but, after all, his version seemed to fall to satisfy completely, and another year passed before the real Santa Claus climbed into a chimney, just as readers of the ancient classic

had pictured him in their minds. Darley given us the sly twinkle in the eye of the good-natured elf, and he had made the reindeer at least as tiny as the poet had described them, but something was lacking.

In 1863 a volume of favorite poems was published in which Doctor Moore's poem was included, this time illustrated by Thomas Nast, whom the American public remembers chiefly as a cartoonist for Harper's Weekly. In this compilation, however, Nast turned his attention to depicting the features of Santa Claus, and for the first time converted an illusive figure into visual reality. Nast may, therefore, be said to have created a Santa Claus which remains the model for all who succeeded him.

What is Christmas without Christmas hymns? And when were the first Christmas hymns sung? There is sound basis for the opinion that the first Christmas hymns were written by Ambrose, bishop of Milan, and by his contemporary, Prudentius. In the earliest days of the Christian era they wrote two hymns which still are widely sung. That by Ambrose is the "Redeemer of the Nations, Come," while Prudentius is the author of "Of the Father's Love Begotten."

Two other ancient hymns in celebration of the Nativity are "From Lands That See the Sun Arise," by Sedullus, and "Jesus, Redeemer of Us All," which is of unknown origin. The earliest English pieces to which the characterization of Christmas hymns, as distinguished from carols, can be applied are those of Ben Jonson, "I Sing the Birth Was Born To-night," and George Wither, "As On the Night Before the Blessed Morn."

The first verse of Jonson's hymn reads:
"I sing the birth was born tonight,
The Author both of life and light;
The angels so did sound it,
And like the ravished shepherds said,
Who saw the light, and were afraid.
Yet searched, and true they found it."

John Milton wrote the swelling "Ode on the Morning of Christ's Nativity," a hymn of rare power which bears the stamp of the genius of the great Puritan poet. Many will recall these opening lines:

"It was in Winter wild,
While the heaven-born child
All meanly wrapt in the rude manger lies;
Nature, in awe to Him,
Hath doff'd her gaudy trim,
With her great Master so to sympathize."

The well-remembered lines, "Hark the herald angels sing, Glory to the new-born King," were written in the Eighteenth century by Charles Wesley, while the opening stanza of the following, by Nahum Tate, is equally well known:

"While shepherds watch'd their flocks by night,
All seated on the ground,
The angel of the Lord came down,
And glory shone around."

A modern hymn which carries on the ancient tradition of inspired poetry is that of the American, Phillips Brooks. Who does not know:

"O little town of Bethlehem!
How still we see thee lie;
Above thy deep and dreamless sleep
The silent stars go by;
Yet in thy dark streets shineth
The everlasting Light;
The hopes and fears of all the years
Are met in thee tonight."

In the formal, dignified cadence of the hymn, writers from the first have given expression to the loftiest of Christmas sentiments.

The Mary Christmas shown above is not the only one in the country. There's one in Austin, Texas, and there was one in Superior, Wis.—that is, until she married Herbert A. Romm. And in Pittsburgh, there's a Mrs. Edward C. Claus who (believe it or not!) lives on Claus avenue and who has become quite accustomed to having children in all parts of the city call her on the telephone and tell Mrs. Claus to tell "Mr. Santa Claus" what they want for Christmas.

"Peace on earth, good will to men"—that is the spirit of Christmas. But it hasn't always been. Back in the early days of New England, the observance of Christmas was severely frowned upon. Gov. William Bradford in his "History of the Plymouth Plantation" has this to say about it in 1621:

"On the day called Christmasday, the Govr called them out to worke (as was used) but the most of this new company excused them selves and said it went against their consciences to work on that day. So the Govr told them that if they made it matter of conscience, he would spare them till they were better informed. So led away the rest and left them; but when they came home at noone from their worke, he found them in the streete at play, openly; some pitching the barr and some at stoole ball, and such like sports. So he went to them, and tooke way their implements, and told them that was against his conscience, that they should play and others worke. If they made the keeping of it matter of devotion, let them keep their houses, but ther should be no gaming or revelling in the streets. Since which nothing hath been attempted that way, at least openly."

But that wasn't the worst of it, for the later settlers in Massachusetts, the Puritans, felt even more strongly about "such festivities as were superstitiously kept in other communities, to the great dishonor of God and offense of others." So on May 11, 1659, the general court in Boston passed a law against Christmas observance which said:

"... It is therefore ordered by this court and the authority thereof that whosoever shall be found observing any such day as Christmas or the like, either by forbearing labor, feasting, or any other way, upon such account as aforesaid, every such person so offending shall pay for every such offense five shillings as a fine to the county."

Did the Bay Staters give up Christmas? They did not! At least this evidence from the diary of the famous Cotton Mather for the last week of December, 1711, seems to indicate that they didn't:

"I hear a number of people of both Sexes, belonging many of them to my Flock, have had on the Christmas night, this week, a Frolic, a revelling Feast, and a Ball, which discovers their corruption, and has a Tendency to corrupt them yett more, and provoke the Holy One to give them up into eternal Hardness of Heart."

THE CHEERFUL CHERUB

The sun turned all the sky to gold
And scattered sparkles on the sea.
It made the whole world beautiful
And then it simply sun-burned me.



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Old Superstitions Died With Use of Telescope

The uses of astronomy began about 4,000 years B. C., when the beginning of the new year, practically coincident with the inundation of the Nile, was fixed by observation of the heliacal rising of the giant star Sirius.

Egyptian instruments were adopted unchanged by the Arabs, Hindus and Chinese, but were improved by the Greeks. Only 2,000 or 3,000 stars are visible to the naked eye, and Ptolemy, with his simple instruments, listed only 1,022 of them.

Twelve centuries passed before the monk Copernicus in 1543 reaffirmed the correct planetary motion. Kepler removed the last doubt by showing that the planets moved in ellipses instead of in circles. But all these ancient astronomers worked only through the human eye and its tiny lens. Then came Galileo, who supplied the visual demonstration hitherto lacking, with his invention of the telescope in 1610, a slender tube 4 feet long, with a concave mirror 2 1/2 inches in diameter, which collected 80 times as much light as the human eye, and with it suddenly pushed out the boundaries of the known stellar universe, brought 500,000 stars into range, and shifted the sun from its traditional position as a satellite of the earth to its rightful place.

With this primitive instrument Galileo revolutionized human thought, established the Copernican theory for all time, marked the downfall of medieval superstition, and placed astronomy, the oldest science, on an unshaken foundation forever.

INDIAN HIROGLYPHICS

Discoveries linking Easter Island in the Pacific with early civilizations in India were recently reported to the French academy of sciences by Paul Pellot, Sir John Marshall, he told the academy, had found hieroglyphics in India estimated to be six thousand years old, and which Prof. Guillaume de Hevesy, French scientist, had identified as corresponding exactly with inscriptions on tablets found more or less in profusion on Easter Island. Professor Hevesy thinks that because of their great similarity the two scripts originated from the same source.

Misjudging Her Dad

Father—You first met my daughter at the seaside, I believe? She told me how she had attracted you.

Sutor—Did she really, sir? Why, she told me you'd be furious if you found out she'd winked.—Humorist (London).

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