

The Gift-Givers

(Continued from page 4 column 6)

Israel. On the way a great storm came but Nicholas prayed and the sea became calm. Another story says a soldier fell and was killed, but Nicholas brought him back to life.

Arriving in the Holy Land, the doors of the church at Golgotha opened when Nicholas approached. He was so impressed with the Holy Land that he decided to give up the church and live in the wilderness. But God commanded him to return to Patras. On the way he heard he was to be sold into slavery so he caused a great storm which drove the ship to Patras.

Nicholas travelled to Myra and before he arrived the Archbishop died. After failing to elect a new Archbishop the people decided to let God make the choice. A dream told the elder that the first man to go into the cathedral should be the new archbishop. That morning Nicholas arrived in the city and went to the cathedral. As the archbishop he was well-known for his kindness to all.

There are many stories about how Nicholas used miracles to help his people and how he opposed the oppression of the Romans. Nicholas died on December 6, about 343 A.D.

More than 600 years after Nicholas' death, Vladimir of Russia journeyed to Constantinople for baptism and heard about Nicholas. Nicholas became the patron saint of Russia and from Russia his fame spread to the Lapps and Samoyeds, the people of the North who use reindeer sleds. Undoubtedly, the story that Santa uses reindeer came from here.

Saint Nicholas visits Holland each year at Christmas time. Since Holland is a seafaring land, Saint Nicholas arrives in a ship from Spain—an echo of the Spanish occupation. He is accompanied by Black Peter—a Moor—costumed in the manner of the days of the Spanish Armada. Saint Nicholas, wearing red bishop's robes and in long white beard, disembarks and rides his white horse to the city center accompanied by dignitaries and brass bands. In some areas the bishop's way is cleared by ghosts bearing whips, followed by a horned creature who carries a birch—a clear throwback to ancient days.

In Bavaria Saint Nicholas visits homes during the first week of Advent, accompanied by a boy dressed as a girl and 12 young men dressed as animals with cowbells around their necks. Elsewhere in central and northern Europe Saint Nicholas is accompanied by Saint Peter, Gabriel or Knich Rupprecht.

Rupprecht sometimes travels alone, bringing gifts. He wears skins or straw. Some places he is called ru-Klas, or rough Nicholas. By some he is called Odin, the Norse god who rode through the world on his eight-footed horse, Sleipner, bringing reward or punishment.

In Germany the gift-giver became the Christ Child, a messenger of the newly born Jesus, and is thought of as a girl. In Switzerland the Christ Child sometimes rode in a sleigh drawn by tiny deer. This may be the representation of the wood spirit of the German forests, a spirit now represented by the fairy or angel at the top of the Christmas tree. In Sweden the gift-giver is a gnomish Father Christmas figure—Jultomten.

Santa Claus

It was in the United States that the jolly Santa Claus evolved. When the Dutch settled in New Amsterdam—now New York—they brought along their Saint Nicholas. In the new environment he changed from the Saint in bishop's robes to a tubby character in short pants. The Dutch paraded his statue through the city on his feast day, but under the influence of the English they merged their holiday with Christmas.

A popular poem, *A Visit From St. Nicholas* ("Twas the night before Christmas, and all through the house..."), was written by Dr. Clement C. Moore. It gave the present description. It is said that Moore described a Dutch friend—a chubby man with a long white beard. The modern Santa Claus was further developed by Thomas Nast in *Harper's Illustrated Weekly* in 1863 with a red, fur-trimmed suit. Santa Claus was pictured by this artist, riding in a sleigh with reindeer, visiting the Civil War soldiers and bringing them presents.



Hanging their stockings with care . . .

Christmas stocking

The custom of hanging up stockings is said to come from a legend that when Bishop Nicholas threw bags of gold down the chimney to form a dowery for poor maidens, the gold landed in stockings hung by the fireplace.

Christmas cards

In early England children prepared specimens of their handwriting, with elaborate borders. Some were scripture verses.

The first modern Christmas card was reported to have been sent by W.C. Dobson, a painter, who sent lithograph copies to his friends in 1845. The following year John Calcott Horsley designed a card for Sir Henry Cole, who was too busy to write his usual Christmas letters.

The L. Pranz Co. began printing cards in 1874, sometimes using up to 20 colors. Prizes were given for the best design submitted.

Bells

Around the world the bells peal on Christmas Day.

Bells have long been used for religious services. They were rung in Egypt for the Feast of Osiris; the Jewish high priests wore bells on their robes; the Roman Emperor Augustus had a bell hung before the Temple of Jupiter.

The first bells used by Christians on churches are believed to be in the Campanin, Italy in about 400 A.D., to call the people to worship.

By the middle ages the pealing of bells had been closely associated with Christmas.



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'TIS THE SEASON FOR SCHWEPPERVESCENCE.



Ring out, ye bells!
 All Nature swells

With gladness of the wondrous story,—
 The world was lorn,
 But Christ is born
 To change our sadness into glory.

Sing, earthlings, sing!
 To-night a King
 Hath come from heaven's high throne to bless us.
 The outstretched hand
 O'er all the land
 Is raised in pity to caress us.

Come at his call;
 Be joyful all;
 Away with mourning and with sadness!
 The heavenly choir
 With holy fire
 Their voices raise in songs of gladness.

The darkness breaks
 And Dawn awakes,
 Her cheeks suffused with youthful blushes.
 The rocks and stones
 In holy tones
 Are singing sweeter than the thrushes.

Then why should we
 In silence be,
 When Nature lends her voice to praises;
 When heaven and earth
 Proclaim the truth
 Of Him for whom that lone star blazes?

No, be not still,
 But with a will
 Strike all your harps and set them ringing;
 On hill and heath
 Let every breath
 Throw all its power into singing!

—Paul Laurence Dunbar