



MERRY YULETIDE



THE last Christmas of the century! Conditions have somewhat altered since the day was celebrated 100 years ago, by a mere handful of happy-hearted American citizens on the Eastern edge of this Continent. A mere handful, I repeat, for the observance of the day, in any joyous fashion had been condemned by the stern-minded Pilgrim fathers several decades before, and the animus of that condemnation still lingered in the austere atmosphere of Puritanical New England. In New York, the New Amsterdam of an earlier period, the little Knickerbocker children breathed a kinder air. They had not yet given up looking for Santa Claus, the generous, jolly St. Nicholas, to provide them with gifts—not upon the 25th of December, but upon New Year's Day. And they sang in the glow of the leaping firelight, in the wide, low-ceiled Dutch kitchen, on New Year's Eve, a song that was designed to refresh his memory and render him mindful of their wishes and expectations.

But how modest were the wants of the youth of that period compared to those of the children of the present day! A few sweetmeats, perhaps a clumsy toy or two, an apple, or a handful of nuts—these were enough to gladden the hearts of our ancestors who happened to be the boys and girls of the year 1800. They may have been as well off—these ancestors of ours; they certainly were as healthy and happy as their descendants, but it is safe to say that we would not, one of us, be willing to change places with them. They did miss a great deal, there is no denying the fact.

Christmas in the South.

To the 20th century child the Colonial Christmas of a hundred years ago in America will seem hardly worthy of the name, so simple was the manner of its observance. Farther to the southward, it is true, a more generous spirit prevailed, for the shadow of Puritan austerity had not fallen upon the free life of that more favored region, where the hearts of the people were as warm as the sunshine of their long, bright Summers, and hospitality knew no bounds. Christmas, from the earliest occupation of the soil, was

a season of merry making for young and old, rich and poor. The slave shared in the general jollity, and was remembered with gifts and indulgences. The gay and, sometimes splendid festivities of the house were repeated on a smaller and humbler scale in the cabins of the slave-quarters. There were feasting and dancing, to the music of the fiddle and the banjo, beneath the roof-tree of the bondman and his master.

There was lack of neither wealth nor beauty in the South, in that earlier day. The men were brave and handsome, and the women fair. There were eyes that outshone the sparkle of diamonds, and lips and cheeks that bloomed like the rose as their graceful owners danced under the mistletoe on Christmas Eve. The holiday season lasted for weeks. It began before Christmas and closed with Twelfth Night, and, in a measure, was a repetition of the English Yuletide, in the manner of its observance. The first settlers had brought over many of the customs of the mother country which, although modified to meet the exigencies of place and circumstance, were yet truly English and gave an English flavor to the happy Christmas, in that sunny, flowering clime beneath genial skies that imparted warmth and kindness to the hearts of the people.

Indeed, when we come to think of it, we



of this new-old world have no Christmas customs that we can claim as distinctly our own. We have, in fact, borrowed them, each and every one, and although we may have altered them much or slightly, they cannot, in real truth, be said to be American.

Our Christmas tree comes from Germany, but we adopted it from England, where, early in the century, Queen Victoria and Prince Albert set up a tree for the pleasure and entertainment of their infant progeny at Windsor. The charming custom, having been thus properly introduced at court, was immediately taken up by loyal Britons all over the Kingdom, and is now well nigh universal.

From Belgium we have gotten the Christmas stocking which is hung beside the open fire on Christmas Eve, for the driver of the reindeer team to fill from his heavy pack, when he comes down the chimney. Perhaps no ceremony connected with the festival was ever so dear to the heart of childhood as this same one of hanging up the stockings, before the advent of stoves and steam heat made it too much of a farce to be enthusiastically indulged in by the somewhat incredulous infant of today. That rather prosaic article of footwear became, for the moment, a receptacle for all manner of possible delights; was, indeed, invested with a magic charm that made it a hallowed object in the eyes of the eager and expectant household, from the older and more enlightened members down to the little tot, in white nightgown, standing on rasy tiptoe to reach his own particular mail.

The Blissful Awakening.

And then the awakening next morning, with at first a dim sense of something unusual—of some great and impending joy, that deepened gradually to a full recognition of the blissful reality—the exquisite, the thrilling excitement of the investigation that speedily followed! Do the boys and girls at this end of the century, with all the lavish preparations that are made for their pleasure, know a tithe of the happiness that quickened the pulses of the less-exacting children of that beginning of the most glorious hundred years the world has ever known?

But to return to that matter of borrowed customs: It is only justice to acknowledge that we have imported our Santa Claus from Holland, and we certainly owe a vast debt of gratitude to Queen Wilhelmina's country for originating a character so productive of enter-

tainment and withal so genial, jolly and generous.

However, even this good saint's day is passing. He is no longer so generally believed in, or so enthusiastically welcomed as in by-gone decades. We are rapidly losing our mythical faiths and fancies in this scientific age. The strong glare of our electric lights is somehow woefully destructive to romance and sentiment. We are living in a period of practical things and have no time for poetry. Even our dreams turn out, in the end, to be merely foreshadowings of some material demonstration of scientific fact.

Science! It is the wall of the dying century, the watchword of the dawning age. Nothing is sacred from its destroying touch; its merciless spirit of investigation spares not, and we eat and sleep and breathe and think scientifically. Our scientifically educated children are provided with scientifically constructed toys. The miniature mechanical wonders that will be hung upon Young America's Christmas tree this year—the last of a full hundred—would have seemed a nightmare vision to the youth of 10 decades ago. Toy automobiles, dolls that walk and talk and cry; that are, in fact, such beautiful and perfect imitations of their human prototypes that they seem almost to live and breathe; miniature engines and mills, automatic work shops, animals so ingeniously constructed that they can perform all the tricks known to the trained menagerie in the circus. In the matter of bon-bons—well, it is fortunate that sweets are now considered hygienic additions to youthful diet, for there was never such a surfeit of dainty confections as offered to tempt the childish palate to over-indulgences as will fall to the share of the 20th century youngster.

Giving of Gifts.

But not to the younger members of the family alone does Christmas mean gifts and giving. The pretty custom of remembering, by some visible token of affection, the friends we particularly love may have been abused and cheapened by lack of discrimination, and by selfishness and extravagance, but it is none the less a charming one, and one which we cannot well afford to ignore or neglect. We call it a Christian custom, but it is ages older than Christianity. Its great antiquity but proves its claim to the respect of Christian nations. The fact that it survived the general demolition of pagan practices at the beginning of the Christian era is sufficient evidence of its worth.

It was observed by the wise men of the East who brought offerings of frankincense and myrrh and gold to the newborn Saviour, on that never-to-be-forgotten night, when they were guided by a star that paused above the town of Bethlehem, where the young child lay cradled in a manger. Three Kings they were who thus



perpetuated a pagan practice and, at the same time, fulfilled a prophecy. Long-fellow has given us a vivid picture of them in the following stanzas:

Three Kings Were They.

Three kings came riding from far away,
Melchior and Gaspar and Balthasar;
Three wise men out of the East were they,
And they traveled by night and they slept by day.

For their guide was a beautiful, wonderful star.
The star was so beautiful, large and clear,
That all the other stars of the sky
Became a white mist in the atmosphere,
And by this they knew the coming was near
Of the Prince foretold in the prophecy.

Three caskets they bore on their saddle-bows,
Three caskets of gold with golden keys;
Their robes were of crimson silk, with rows
Of bells and pomegranates and furrowings,
Their turbans like blossoming almond trees.

And as the three kings rode into the West,
Through the dusk of night, over hill and dell,
And sometimes they nodded with beard on breast,
And sometimes they talked, as they paused to rest,
With the people they met at some wayside well.

And when they came to Jerusalem,
Herod the Great, who had heard this thing,
Sent for the wise men and questioned them;
And said, "Go down into Bethlehem,
And bring me tidings of this new King."

So they rode away, and the star stood still,
The only one in the gray of morn,
Yes, it stopped, it stood still of its own free will,
Right over Bethlehem on the hill,
The City of David where Christ was born.

And the three kings rode through the gate and guard,
Through the silent street, till their horses turned
And neighed as they entered the great inn yard;
But the windows were closed and the doors were barred,
And only a light in the stable burned.

And cradled there in the scented hay,
In the air made sweet by the breath of kine,
The little child in the manger lay,
The child that would be a King one day
Of a kingdom not human, but divine.

A Druidical Custom.

But the giving of gifts at this season of the year is not the only pagan custom that marks the celebration of the 25th of December. It seldom or never occurs to us that when we deck our homes with holly and cedar and fir, and hang up the mistletoe in the most convenient place, we are following a fashion that antedates the nativity of Christ by many centuries.

Far back, in the almost forgotten ages, the Druids, those mysterious pagans, about whom we know so little and speculate so much, held a feast, on or near the 25th of the month of December, to celebrate the rebirth of the sun, or, to be more explicit, the turn of the year that was immediately preceded by the longest night and the shortest day. It was their habit at this season to gather and weave into wreaths and garlands branches of holly and boughs of fir, with which to decorate their homes. But they had in this another purpose besides the simple one of decoration. All this verdure was carried indoors, to the end that the nymphs and spirits of the woods might feel disposed to enter and receive protection and shelter from the frost and snow of midwinter.

The cutting of the mistletoe was a re-

ligious ceremony, solemnly conducted. When the end of the year was approaching the old Druids marched forth, with much form and mystery, to gather the mistletoe, in order to present it to the great god. All the people were invited to assist, the priests crying as they marched: "The New Year is at hand, gather the mistletoe!"

"Mumming" was a custom adopted by the Christians from the ancient Saturnalia of the Romans. It invoked the exchanging of mutual gifts and dress, and was, in short, a sort of wild and riotous masked revel that was finally condemned and forbidden by the Church as being out of keeping with Christian life. The custom of giving is distinctly traceable to this same Saturnalia, when, in addition to the mutual interchange of tokens of love and remembrance, the heathen folk of that day made a propitiatory offering of corn to Ceres.

Hunting the Wren.

But the strangest and most interesting of these pagan adoptions originated in the North. There is to this day observed, in Hall Caine's country—the Isle of Man—perhaps the queerest survival of them all—the ceremony of "hunting the wren." The origin of this custom is in an old Norse legend of a siren who lured men into the sea. A charm was finally ob-

Hebrew term, meaning "The devil is in the house."

In Portland.

As to the celebration of the day in our own state and city, in the year 1900, it will not in any material manner differ from that of any other commonwealth or municipality in the Union. There will be the usual dinners and other parties in the evening, preceded by the church service in the morning. There will be dancing and games and family reunions. The holly wreaths will hang in the windows and the mistletoe will tempt timid youths in the hall.

The poor will not be forgotten. Generous feasts will be provided for those who are unable to provide for themselves. The children in the "Homes," the old ladies who are the wards of a philanthropic public and all others who are unfortunate will be kindly remembered on this day of days. Even the prisoners in the city and county jails will not be forgotten, for on the anniversary of the birth of One who gave himself a voluntary sacrifice for the sins of men, the heart of the whole world is touched and softened.

The angel song still echoes sweet and clear as when it was first heard by shepherds watching their flocks that rare night upon the hills of Bethlehem—"Glory to God in the highest, and on earth, peace, good will toward men!"

LISCHEN M. MILLER.

CHRISTMAS.

Hark! The Christmas-tide has come; ring out the bells in chimes of peace!
Sing, thou herald angels, sing! Let not the good to mankind cease.
Far o'er the earth, with loud acclaim, the news once more to mortals bring—
Echo it, again proclaim, "Christ is born again!"

Loud the Christmas carols ring, breathing peace, good-will to all.
Angels echo them on high; Bethlehem's infant now recall.
Deck with holly, berries red, emblems sweet of love and joy;
The eastern star again has led to where the Saviour lies.

—B. Keene.

