

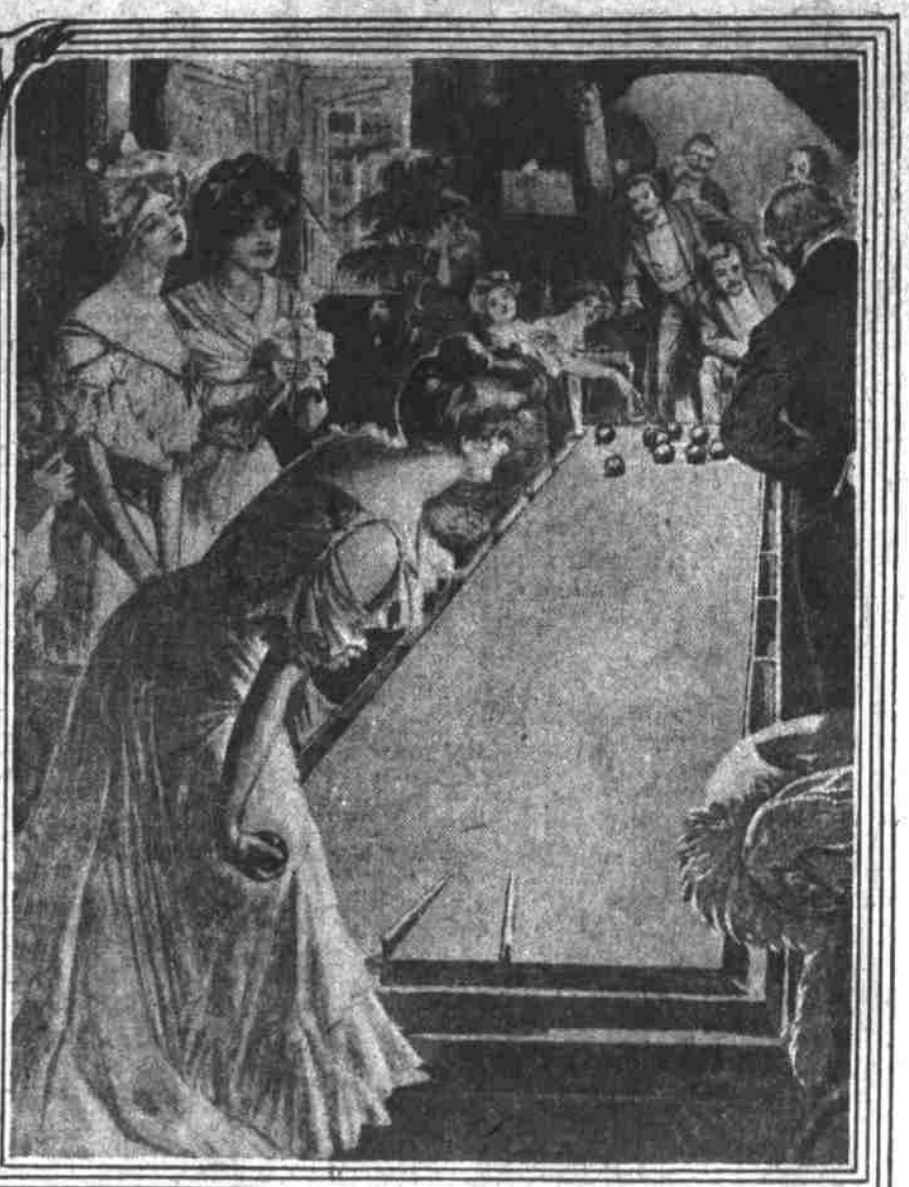
The Christmas Dance that Has Passed Away



Virginia Christmas Dance of Old Plantation Days. (FROM HARPER'S BAZAR)



A Century and a Half Ago.



Parlor Bowls, an English Substitute for the Christmas Dance.



Old Drawing of a Christmas Dance.

"Christmas Gift" an Ancient Custom

WHEN the universal Christmas hold-up confronts you, don't explode. Refuse, if you want to; but don't dwell in your thoughts upon the increasing depravity of the human race; don't exult the rugged independence of our forefathers. You may not yield cheerfully to the spirit of the season when the time comes to remember the office boy, the bootblack, the hotel waiters, the restaurant force, the ashman, the garbage man.

The messenger service, the newsboys and others. Somehow you picture the Christmas "hold-ups" of bygone days, when a daring highwayman barred the progress of the lumbering stage coach and coolly took his toll.

Christmas largesse is almost as old as Christmas. In the South, if you happen to be in any section that preserves even a modicum of the old-time atmosphere, you are liable to encounter everywhere, on Christmas morning, from such negroes as have some claim to knowing you, the familiar phrase: "Christmas gift!"

It means, as one of the class favored by fortune, from you the less lucky are free to ask Christmas largesse, and that with no sinking of independence, with no sacrifice of self-respect.

The custom does assume the superiority of a giver—does, indeed, assume it not very far from the level of overlord and serf. But that is because it has passed through the slough of slavery, which was serfdom, in literal fact.

At any rate, the custom goes back at least to the sweetest and most touching of Yuletide doings in England, the Christmas carol. That, too, came first into being when serfdom was England's common law, when the lord of castle and of keep was serenaded by his dependents, and, in his munificent turn, gave them lordly largesse to drink his noble health.

But the beginning was not then. Farther and farther back we must go, until we reach the very source of the carol and of the song of England—the jongleurs and the minstrels, who came from Normandy with conquering William and were gentlemen adventurers as independent as you please, and very ferocious fighters in the bargain.

So the "Christmas gift," in the course of the ages, has had its ups and downs, ranging from the lordly acceptance by a titled minstrel of plain yet royal wages to the humble appeal of the dependent serf, whose welfare was at his overlord's will and pleasure. The spirit in which, at various periods, it has been given and received was really what determined its social significance; and there have been times when that spirit was precisely the spirit of the most polite highwaymen who ever bade startled traveler stand and deliver.

The Christmas waltz of England, with their "God rest you, merry gentlemen; let nothing you dismay," soon established the precedent that, wherever they chose to intone their carols before a door, that door must be open to them hospitably, and a table must be furnished forthwith with good things of the season for their prompt refreshment.

But there were curmudgeons among them then as there are now. Persons who happened to have other pleasures on their hands, and, realizing keenly that the jovial waits came uninvited, could not perceive why any one should play reluctant host. The curmudgeons unquestionably had the right of it, but the carol singers, many a time, burst in doors and wrecked house furnishings in their wrath at the refusal. There was a Christmas hold-up in grim reality.

"Christmas gift" isn't altogether bad, as it isn't altogether new. It is only a recrudescence of an old, old custom by a humanity whose nature, in the mass, changes slowly. And when it is all sifted down to its essence, you are getting a rather sincere compliment—the same compliment his jongleurs paid bold William the Conqueror, and his fellow-citizens paid Dick Whittington, who became Lord Mayor of London.

HEIGH-HO for the old-time Christmas dance!

Ho for the evening of merriment, when joyous wights trod the steps while the Yule log burned; rosy grace for the Christmas dance of olden times—as far back as the days when Arthur and his knights celebrated in their castles, when the barons of William the Conqueror held their courts on the happy eve, and

In the hall, the serf and vassal Held that night, their Christmas wassail; Many a carol, old and saintly, Sang the minstrels and the waits.

The Christmas dance of olden times has passed away. At this time, when you are filled with the joyous spirit of the season, when you go to parties and play modern games, will it not be pleasant to peep beyond the curtains of the past and observe how our forefathers celebrated the day, as long ago as the time of the early Saxons and the old courts of France?

Of old the dance was a Christmas institution. Many persons, indeed, living today can recall the celebrations of their childhood, especially in the South, when Christmas Eve was the time for dancing. In England, too, the Christmas dance has passed within the memory, almost, of a generation. Now, games such as parlor bowls, masquerade parties and formal dances, as the German, have taken the places of old methods of welcoming the season.

Again the ballroom is wide open thrown. The oak beams festooned with the garlands gay. The red gals were the fiddlers all about. Where, doused with pride, the good old tunes they play. Strike, fiddlers strike! We're ready for the set. The young folks' feet are eager for the dance; We'll trip Sir Roger and the minstrel. And revel in the last dances from France. —H. H. Adams

BACK in the sixth century, when King Arthur and his noble band ruled in England, there were gay times in the royal castle at Christmas time. Pageants were held, there were sumptuous banquets and joyous dancing.

Dancing had even then become the feature of the happy celebration. Picture the merry scene. The great Arthur had besieged an opposing army at York, won victories in Somersetshire, gone to the North and attacked the Picts and Scots, and now, victorious but weary, has returned to York, restored the Christian churches, and celebrates Christmas with unrestrained joy.

There is the great hall, in the center the Round Table and Arthur and his twenty-four knights. Log fires blaze and illuminate the mighty chamber. As the flames leap, Arthur, leaning back, smiles, while scores of dancers move about the room. Some are in masquerade, in quaint and uncouth costumes. Laughter rings. Minstrels sing. Harpers and pipe-players fill the place with melodies. Jugglers juggle and the dancers dance.

court and the gay knights danced and sang, and, so it became the custom, every dance was concluded with a kiss.

Dancing became a mania—people danced at their homes and in the streets and even before the churches. A quaint story is told by William of Malmesbury, which was believed to be the recital of a sinner who was punished for dancing. It is a curious commentary on the customs of the time.

"I, Othebert, a sinner, have lived to tell this tale. It was in a town where was a church of St. Magnus.

And the priest, Rathbertus, had just begun the mass, and I with my comrades, fifteen young women and seventeen young men, were dancing outside the church. And we were singing so loud that our songs were distinctly heard inside the building, and interrupted the service of the mass. And the priest came out and told us to desist, and when we did not he prayed God and St. Magnus that we might dance for our punishment for a year to come.

"A youth, whose sister was dancing with us, seized her by the arm to drag her away, but it came off in his hand, and she danced on. For a whole year we continued.

"No rain fell on us; cold nor heat, nor hunger nor thirst, nor fatigue affected us; neither our shoes nor our clothes wore out; but still we went on dancing. We trod the earth down to our knees, next to our nuddles, and at last were dancing in a pit. At the end of the year release came."

Dancing continued as the popular form of entertainment at Christmas, and in 1348 King Edward III set up a Round Table at Windsor, in imitation of King Arthur, and inaugurated it with tournaments and feasts. There was a tremendous celebration at Guildford, concerning which an ancient historian wrote:

"Orders were given to manufacture for the Christmas sports eighty tunics of buckram of different colors, and a large number of masks—some with faces of women, some with beards, some like angel heads of silver. There were to be mantles embroidered with heads of dragons, tunics wrought with heads and wings of peacocks, and embroidered in many other fantastic ways.

The celebration of Christmas lasted from All Hallows' Eve, the 31st of October, till the day after the Purification, the 3d of February. At the court a lord of manor was appointed, who reigned during the whole of this period, and was called the "master of the merry sports."

"He ruled over and organized all the games and sports, and during the period of his rule there was nothing but a succession of masques, disguisings and dancing of all kinds." All the nobles, even the Mayor of London, had an officer of this kind chosen in their households.

Dancing was practiced by the nobility of both sexes. The damsels of London spent their evenings in dancing before their masters' doors and the country lasses danced upon the village green.

The celebration of Christmas assumed spectacular proportions during the reign of Queen Elizabeth.

There was a revival in her reign of the pomp which had marked her father's court. Before the celebration of the Christmas of 1558 the queen made a state entry into London, surrounded by her lords and ladies. There were great pageants and dramatic displays. For twelve days the Christmas celebrations lasted. On the eve of Christmas there was a great dinner, when the boar's head was brought into the great chamber, and an old chronicler wrote: "Dinner ended, the musicians prepare to sing a song at the highest table, which ceremony accomplished, then the officers are to address themselves every one in his office, to avoid the tables in fair and decent manner. Then, after a little repose, the persons at the highest table arise and prepare to revel, in which time the butlers and other servants with them are to dine in the library.



French Ball in Honor of Noel.

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Dancing was made a feature of the plays and pantomimes, which reached the height of popularity during the reign of George IV. So popular became the laughable and ridiculous pantomimes that David Garrick, the noted actor, lamented:

They in the drama find no joy. They do not on mimicry and toy. Thus when a dance is in my bill, Nobility must needs be in the throng. Or send three days before the time, To crowd a new-made pantomime.

In the early days the dance consisted of hopping, leaping and tumbling about. Then the Normans introduced "rounds," and the Crusaders, returning from the East, brought back the sensuous dances of the Orient.

During the middle ages the favorite Christmas dance was the roundel. To the music of the roundelay people joined hands and danced in circles or long processions. A figure dance, known as the morris, came into favor during the reign of Edward III. On Christmas Eve masquers came into the halls with bells attached to their gaudy clothing, and would perform the frenzied dance.

MERRY KINGS AND QUEENS

Henry VIII was a merry dancer, and on many a Christmas danced to music composed by himself. "Good Queen Bess" always took part in the Christmas revels, and was so interested in her dance that sage ambassadors were called upon to judge whether or not she surpassed her sister princesses.

In those days the ladies did not dress as simply as they do now; their collars were like towers, their coifs were overlaid with jewels and osprey plumes; they wore starched ruffs, sleeves and skirts of buckram, wide and high hoods, immense trains, stiff, high-heeled jeweled shoes, and jeweled stomachers. Imagine a lady in this regalia performing an agile step.

It is little wonder, then, that the favorite dance was the "pavane," a stiff, slow and stately movement, performed to majestic measures of music, eminently fitting for a stately dance, a movement which Sir John Hawkins declared "resembled that of a peacock."

But there were other dances—the cinque-pace, of which Shakespeare wrote, the lively courtes and galliards and the brawls, jigs and fancies. Men favored the brawls. They were vicious, agile, springy dances, derived from the French and Italian brancies. About the Christmas brawl an old song runs:

There is a brawl come out of France. The first ye hardie this year is. But I must leave and thou must hope. And we shall argue all three. The fourth must bounce it like a toppe. And so we shall argue a. I pray the minstrel make no stop. For we will merry be a.

And so as the Christmases passed they danced, blithely, merrily, until, in England, they finally began to play blindman's buff and other games in the holiday season, and it seemed they became weary of the older pleasant sport.

Until comparatively recent years dancing was the favorite amusement at Christmas celebrations in the United States. Throughout the South, especially, Christmas was a time of merriment and fun. Possibly some of you with silver locks can recall these old-time Christmases, when joy reigned as it did in the days of "merry, merry England."

Can't you see the great room lighted with the glow of the Yule log in the hearth? Can't you remember how it was carried in on the back of the strongest negro on the plantation? And don't you see the band of little pickaninnies frolicking behind, beating rag-time and singing the darkest coon songs?