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(For the Evening Telegram.)

OUR MERRY OLD CHRISTMAS AND ITS FOLK-LORE AND LEGENDS

BY ALEX. A. PARSONS.

"And Christmas once is Christmas still;
The gate through which He came,
And forests wild and murmuring rill,
And fruitful field and breezy hill,
And all that else the wide world fill
Are vocal with His name."

THE prevailing question, as usual, at this season of the year is, "How to arrange for a good time at Christmas?" I have been asked repeatedly, during the past few days, to assist in solving the problem; but, for the life of me, I cannot tell of anything new. Almost every device under the sun has been adopted and worked out, and still the question remains "on the order paper." My mind runs hurriedly back over thirty-five years or more, seeking to locate "the coveted beam of light." It seems to me that we always had a good time, but it would be a difficult task to tell just how and why. Personally, I have always been too busy to stop and think whether I have had a good time or not. The holiday, so far as I am concerned usually consists of going from house to house, attending to routine affairs, and making a cold trip up-town, with a list of purchases much longer than my pocket-book, and back again to ordinary occupation.

According to my experience, Christmas cheer, like all of life's joys, depends upon our willingness to have it so, and our power of accepting for ourselves whatever spirit is "in the air." The sense of participation in Christmas is not necessarily measured by sordid counting of gifts, and invitations and attentions from other people. Such things do not make us really happy nor fortify us for the long years of age when we must live among the symbols of what life has meant to us!

An intelligent and far-seeing official, one who carefully considers the value of every dollar before he spends it, "chips in" anxiously and asks: "How can we live more economically? How can we save on our limited income?" Both these questions are timely and pertinent. Either necessities are higher than ever in price or our needs are higher. But whichever it is, there is a Mrs. Blank, the wife of a deputy minister, who has studied the whole question for years; studied because she had to do so for her own household of husband and children on barely enough at best to make two

ends meet, while her husband had to study it for the Newfoundland Government. So between the two they had exceptional opportunities in actual experience and in authoritative investigation. But I forget. 'Tis not about the economic side of Christmas I am now writing. It is about the folk-lore and legends associated with it. It is true, I believe, that our modern Christmas grew out of a pagan festival—in form at all events; in sentiment, of course, it was directly opposed to paganism. For centuries before the Christian era every country in the world had its chief festival at the winter solstice, or turning point of the year.

It is undoubtedly true that pagan forms taken from festivals like the Saturnalia marked the early Christmas celebrations. Later, various portions of the Druidical rites were added and then some of the ceremonies of the ancient Germans and Scandinavians. This was because the early Church sought to reconcile heathen converts by adopting the harmless features of their festivals, investing them, where possible, with a Christian significance. In this sense Christmas is a continuation of the pagan festivals, although, of course, it was the desire of the Christians to supplant the heathen celebration, not to continue it.

Somebody asks, "How did December 25 come to be fixed as Christmas Day? When was the real birthday of the Christ-Child?" Well, it seems that about 340 A.D. Saint Cyril made careful inquiry as to the date of the birth of Christ and reported December 25 as the correct date. Pope Julius accepted this, and some years later established the festival at Rome on this date. Before the close of the century it was accepted by every nation in Christendom. The actual year is unknown, and it is certain that the month and day can never be recovered. They were absolutely unknown to the early fathers of the Church.

As to the use of lighted candles on the Christmas tree, let me say that these were a feature of the ancient Jewish Feast of Lights. This was held about Christmas time, and it is likely that lights were twinkling in every Jewish house in Bethlehem and Nazareth at the very hour of the birth of Christ. This custom was probably merged into the Christian

celebration of Christmas. Other authorities claim that the candles are a survival of the huge Yule candle used as a sign of the light that came into the world as prophesied by John the Baptist. In connection with candles and the Christmas-tree, I must say a word about Santa Claus. Now, why is this good-natured saint always represented in the newspapers, by advertisers and others, as an old man? No one knows. Some writers claim that it dates back to the Priapus of Virgil and Petronius, who held in his capacious bosom all manner of fruits and dainties. It is more probable, however, that the jolly, kindly character of Santa Claus is easier to show as an old man with white hair and beard and ruddy face.

The use of the mistletoe is obvious enough. It was connected with the heathen Saturnalia and was adopted into the Christian festivities. The ancient Druids regarded it as an object of special veneration, but only when it grew upon an oak tree. At the time of the winter solstice the Druids gathered the mistletoe with great ceremony and the people hung sprays of it over their doors as an offer of shelter to the gods of the forest during the cold season. It was first hung in the servants' hall at Christmas in England, but soon invaded the parlor and the drawing-room.

Holly, our other favorite decoration for the Christmas feast, grows in practically every country in the world, as there are more than one hundred and fifty varieties of it. The custom of using holly at the winter festival is of great antiquity; it is believed to have come from the pagan festivals. It was used by the Christians by the early Christians. According to tradition holly is the bush in which Jehovah appeared to Moses.

The Christmas card seems to be an outgrowth of the "Christmas pieces" which were popular from about 1800 to 1850. The first real cards appear to have been printed in London in 1846 by a man named Joseph Cundall, who admits, however, that the idea was not his own, but Sir Henry Cole's. The custom did not become popular till about 1863, since which time it has increased tremendously. It is computed that more than twenty thousand dollars' worth of Christmas cards and calendars were sold here in St. John's last year from the 10th to 25th of December.

About the Star of Bethlehem! Kepler proved that Jupiter, Saturn and Mars were in conjunction three times in the seven hundred and forty-seventh year after the foundation of Rome, that year being very near the date of the birth of Christ. This conjunction appeared in the sign of the Zodiac which astrologers connected with the fortunes of Judea, and certain writers have tried to identify it as the Star of Bethlehem. Furthermore, according to the Chinese astronomical tables, a very bright new star actually did appear in the heavens at this very period. This identical conjunction of planets occurs only once in about eight hundred years. It has been shown, however, by later astronomers that the appearance of this conjunction does not answer the requirements of St. Matthew's description. Therefore, the Biblical authorities claim that the text implies a supernatural appearance in the heavens and not a star in the ordinary sense of the word.

Here's an interesting tradition as to how the hanging of the stockings originated. Many years ago children hung up their stockings on St. Nicholas' Eve (December 6). Young women in convents all over Europe also placed their stockings at the door of the Abbess. This was an adaptation of the custom of young women's praying to Saint Nicholas to provide them with good husbands and a marriage dowry. According to tradition, Saint Nicholas once, under cover of night, threw three purses of gold into the house of a poor nobleman who was unable to provide for his three daughters. The money was their dowry and enabled them to marry. Some claim that the shape of the purses of that day, which were much like stockings, gave rise to the custom. Gradually the hanging up of the stockings on Saint Nicholas' Eve ceased and the custom was incorporated into our Christmas festivities, where it has been retained.

The idea of kissing under the mistletoe is a relic of Scandinavian mythology. The story goes that Loki hated Balder, the Apollo of the North. Everything "that springs from fire, air, earth and water" had given its promise, under oath, not to hurt Balder, except the mistletoe, which was deemed too insignificant to be asked. Loki made an arrow of mistletoe which he gave to blind Hoder to shoot and which killed Balder, who was restored to life at the request of the gods. The mistletoe was then given to the Goddess of Love to keep, and every one who passed under it received a kiss to show that it was the emblem of love, not of death. Some authorities allege that kissing under the mistletoe is a survival of the Saturnalia of the ancients.

The other day a bright boy, who expects lots of things on Christmas Eve, and who is a great admirer of pictures, asked me the question: "Why do artists picture Christ and His mother with a halo around their heads when they really did not differ from the people among whom they lived?" I answered: "The halo or 'nimbus,'

as the correct term is in sacred art, is simply a sign of sanctity and is placed around the heads of the saints as well as those of the Christ and His mother. The use of the nimbus for sacred persons dates back to the Egyptians, but in Christian art it did not appear until about the sixth century.

Closely allied to these superstitions is one that still prevails in certain parts of rural England. This is the belief that if on Christmas Eve one cautiously approaches a hive of bees in the stillness of the night he will hear the bees singing. They know that the joyous festival is at hand and, awakening from their winter slumber, they join with mankind in celebration of this holy anniversary. And on the stroke of midnight the attentive listener will hear their subdued humming resolve itself into a melodious singing of the hundredth Psalm. Again, the belief that animals are inspired with a knowledge of the advent of Christmas and are given the power of expressing adoration at midnight is still very widespread. In many places it is believed that the sheep at this hour awake and go in procession, in commemoration of the visit of the angels to the shepherds on the hills of Bethlehem. The cattle, too, are said to celebrate the birth of the Saviour by keeping in their stalls. Indeed, it is commonly believed among the peasants of Europe that this actually takes place on Christmas night, but 'tis a sight seldom witnessed by human eyes, owing to the condition that only those who are free from sin are permitted to behold the miracle. Evidently this superstition early found its way to the New World and, in a modified form, still lingers among the North American Indians, some one—Dr. Grenfell, if I mistake not—in his "Experiences and Observations in Newfoundland and Labrador," relates that one moonlight Christmas Eve he was surprised to see a Micmac Indian creeping cautiously through the woods. When asked what he was doing, he replied: "Me watch to see the deer kneel. Christmas night all the deer kneel and look up to Great Spirit."

"They tell a lovely story, in lands beyond the sea,
How when the King of Glory lay on his mother's knee,
Before the Prophet princes came,
Bringing gifts in his hand,
The dumb beasts felt the miracle
Men could not understand.

"The gentle, patient donkey, and the ox that trod the corn,
Kneel down beside the manger, and knew that Christ was born,
And so they say in Sweden, at twelve on Christmas morn,
The dumb beasts kneel to worship, and see the Christian light.

"This fancy makes men kinder to creatures needing care;
They give them Christmas greeting and dainty Christmas fare;
The cat and dog sup gaily, and a sheet of golden rain,
Is raised above the roof-tree for the birds on Christmas morn."

But enough about folk-lore for the present. Let me conclude with something more in harmony with the spirit of the age in which we live. Reader, were you ever at sea on an ocean liner during the festive season? I happened to be there on one occasion, and I now recall my experience with a good deal of pleasure. Christmas morning dawned cold, with a luminous blue sky and the waves running rose-color from the eastern glow. Even the fashionable folk among the passengers were up betimes untying boxes and packages. Suddenly a high, pure soprano voice rang out in the familiar old carol, "Come All Ye Faithful." The next instant scores of voices caught up the song and the ship resounded with it. This brought out a prominent clerical passenger, who was exuberant. "What is the conventional church programme compared to this!" he exclaimed. "Why, it is wonderful! It is like the spontaneity of the olden times when the carols were sung in the streets by

everybody on Christmas morning. Go on!" And we did go on, the watch on deck, and even some of the crew below, joining in, singing every Christmas song, hymn and canticle that came into our heads. We had a special Christmas service at eleven o'clock and dinner at noon. The water was smooth and there were few absentees, and every one looked happy. Our own enjoyment was heightened by the knowledge that the crew to a man had been served with all the extras of the day—turkey, cranberry sauce and other delectable things. That was in pre-war days, when the Allan Company's fine steamers ran between Liverpool and Philadelphia via St. John's and Halifax.

What changes have taken place in the East as well as in the West since the birth of Christ. In that great region where the first Christmas was celebrated, the land was then filled with old battlefields, and ruined cities, and marks of past greatness. The Egypt of the Sphinx and the Pyramids, of Moses and the Exodus, was still a land of ancient learning and splendid monuments, though various waves and storms of war had broken over her. Alexandria, then a new city, was a place of great activity, and crowded with philosophers and merchants. The generals of Alexander had divided his domains after his death; and some had reigned in Egypt, others had reigned in Syria. The Egyptian capital was Alexandria, the Syrian capital was Antioch. Near by was Damascus, an enterprising trading station between the old East and the new West. And between Antioch and Alexandria was Palestine, the Holy Land, whose capital was Jerusalem.

At that time wild men were chasing the wild beasts of the woods over the present sites of St. Petersburg and Moscow. On a little island in the Seine, the rude huts of the trading station of Lutetia, in the country of the Parisii, occupied the position now held by Paris. Besides the Thames, Britons who had never seen an Englishman were settled on the site of London. Except along the near shores of the great oceans. In the New World, on the Pacific Coast, in California, there were young trees which to-day, in their age, astonish the traveler by their vast size, in the groves of Mariposa. With these exceptions, hardly anything with which our eyes are acquainted had its existence in the lands which make our modern world, save the courses of rivers, the expanse of seas, and the heights of the everlasting hills.

History assures us that this was the world and thus appeared the people in the Roman part of it, when Christ was born. A world without a steam engine, without a railway, without a flying machine, without a submarine contrivance, without a spark of electricity, made serviceable for the use of man; but with plenty of busy people in it, fathers and mothers, loving and hating, fighting temptation with more or less success, and all of them in great need of Him who for their sake and ours was born on Christmas Day.

"The years come not back that have circled away
With the past of the Eastern land,
When He plucked the corn on the Sabbath day,
And healed the withered hand;
But the bells shall join in a joyous chime
For the One who walked the sea,
And ring again for the better time
Of the Christ that is to be."

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