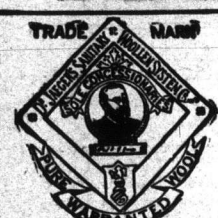


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The Origin of Christmas Customs.

Forgotten Meanings of Yule-Tide. By Edgar S. Nash.

There are a few things in existence to-day which have not been changed or moulded in the hands of Progress. One by one legends and customs have been disproved and overthrown, yet none have dared attack the legends and the customs sacred to Christmas-tide. Here and there a savant has tried to prove that December 25th does not mark the birthday of Christ. Men and women read, smile, and pass on.

The time of year corresponding to our Christmas-tide has always been a period of rejoicing. It marks the winter solstice. The days begin to lengthen, and the sun no longer journeys away from the earth, but enters upon his return. It is a promise of renewed light and warmth, of the approach of the summer days, and men hail these signs with every expression of gladness.

In Rome, the Saturnalia, or feast of Saturn, fell at about the same time as our Christmas, and it marked the greatest festival of the Roman year. The city abandoned itself to gaiety. Unbounded license held sway; universal mirth was the order of the day; friends feasted friends, and foes were reconciled. There were no slaves, no masters; all social distinctions were laid aside. Work was stopped throughout the city, and no war was ever entered upon at this time.

The tree as the emblem of life also figured conspicuously in the earlier religions. In Egypt the palm tree put forth a new shoot each month, and at the time of the winter solstice it was the custom among the Egyptians to decorate the houses with a branch of palm bearing twelve shoots. In Rome the fir tree was regarded with veneration, and during the Saturnalian festivities the halls and houses were hung with evergreen boughs.

In England, in the days of the Druids, the houses were decked with evergreens in order that the sylvan spirits might repair to their grateful shelter and remain protected from the nipping frost and icy winter winds.

Farther to the north the wild Teuton tribes worshipped their god in wooded places, and looked upon the fir trees as his sacred emblem. The period corresponding to the Roman Saturnalia was the festival of Thor. This festival, like the Roman feast, was given over to the most barbaric pleasures and the wildest form of enjoyment. Among these people the festivity was known as Yule-tide.

When Christianity spread abroad, men knew that in the story of Christ's nativity was realized what they in their blindness had striven to typify. So they adapted the old customs of their ancestors to the new order of things.

Among Northern European tribes a great fir tree was set up in each household at Christmas-tide. At its base were placed representations of Adam and Eve; in the branches coiled the Serpent, and on the topmost bough gleamed a candle, symbolizing the Light of the World, through whom alone was victory over the Serpent possible. Later in history the tree was more profusely decorated with gaudy knick-knacks, all of which were at first symbolical. But the children were not allowed to see the tree till Christmas morning.

To account for its appearance there, the parents used to tell the children a Chaldean legend. Years ago it was the custom for every Saxon household to burn the Yule log on Christmas Eve. This was a great knarled root or tree trunk, cut the day before Christmas and brought into the hall on Christmas Eve with great ceremony, and accompanied with music. Each member of the household would sing a Yule song, standing on the centre of the log.

Then an attempt was made to drive the Yule log into the great hall, as if it were a stubborn horse. The log was given that the "dun" refused to move, and the whole company was summoned to take a hand, and with loud shouting

dragged it to the great fireplace. It was lighted with the charred remnant of the former year's log, which had been carefully preserved for this occasion, and which was supposed to insure the house against ill luck.

The children were told that during the night the Yule log gave birth to the Christmas tree which they found in the hall on Christmas morning loaded with gifts.

The Christmas tree was introduced into England by Prince Albert, consort of Queen Victoria. From the palace the custom spread, until now the Christmas tree is a necessary feature of an English Christmas.

In Germany and other European countries it was believed by the children that the tree glittering with candles and bright baubles, and the gifts found beneath the tree, were the work of jolly old Saint Nicholas, Sant Nicholas, or Santa Claus, as we know him. This kindly saint was no legendary character. He lived about 300 A.D., and was a noted Bishop of Asia Minor. He was looked upon as the patron saint of generosity because of his liberality.

Three daughters of a poor nobleman could not marry as advantageously as they should because their father could give them no dowry. But one night one of the daughters found in her room a purse, shaped like a stocking, filled with gold, evidently thrown in the window by some one from without. The next night the second daughter found a purse in her room, and on the third night the father caught Saint Nicholas in the act of throwing the third purse in the window.

From that story originated the custom of hanging up the stockings on Christmas Eve. Thereafter the young girls at the convent schools would hang their stockings on the door of the Mother Superior's room on Saint Nicholas night. On the following morning they would be found filled with gifts and dainties, and a little hint from Saint Nicholas as to

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