

THE SIGNIFICANCE OF CHRISTMAS

By PROFESSOR GEORGE COULSON WORKMAN

HAVING been asked to write an article on the significance of the Christmas festival, I wish, before offering some reflections, to make a few remarks. These have reference to the birthday of Jesus, concerning which there has always been a great uncertainty, as most of the *Courier* readers are aware; for I assume it to be generally understood that the exact date is unknown.

Though the 25th of December has long been celebrated as the anniversary of his birth, that can scarcely have been the actual date, partly because the period of observing the Nativity was not uniform among the early Christians, many having observed it in the month of April or May, and partly because the end of December was the height of the rainy season in Judea, when shepherds living in that country could hardly have been watching their flocks by night on the plains of Bethlehem. The most probable reason why the Church was led to fix upon the accepted date is believed to have been the primitive way of viewing the winter-solstice, which was once regarded as the beginning of the renewed life and activity of the powers of nature.

As a matter of fact, neither the day nor the year of the Nativity can be certainly determined. But that the precise time remains unknown should not occasion any surprise, especially when we consider the age in which our Lord was born and the circumstances under which his birth took place. Nor is our want of knowledge on that point of any real consequence, for nothing vital or essential depends upon it. Jesus *did* come, his work *was* done, and the effects of his life and teaching are no less important, and no less apparent either, than if we knew the very day and hour of his arrival.

When I begin to dwell on the significance of the festival, there rushes into my mind the question, What would the result be if we had no Christmas? And immediately there comes the answer: We should have no special gatherings and greetings, no special presents and benefactions, no special sermons and services, no special carols and songs at this period of the year. Those usages would disappear, and with their disappearance would go much of our Christianity; for it was the birth of Christ that prompted the observance of Christmas, it was that observance that brought about the customs connected with it, and it is those customs that have not only served to make the season the gladdest of the year, but have also helped to beget the spirit that characterises the remainder of the year.

As others have so often discussed them, I shall not deal with the many pleasant customs of the Christmas-tide, such as the tasteful decorations and the beautiful illuminations connected with the day, and the elaborate preparations made in anticipation of the festival from year to year. My reflections are concerned rather with the spirit begetten by its observance. This spirit has a three-

fold manifestation, or is manifested in three different directions.

In the first place, Christmas is a domestic festival. It is primarily a home institution, and is pre-eminently a time for family re-unions, reciprocal remembrances, and the giving and receiving of gifts. Next to the life of the individual, the life of the home is that on which Christ laid the greatest stress. He enacted no legislation, though he came very near to it in what He said respecting marriage; but the way in which He emphasised the sacredness of the marriage bond shows that He regarded a healthy family life as the foundation of a healthy social life. Nothing tends more powerfully to promote the moral healthfulness of the home than the kindly, Christ-like spirit which the observance of Christmas begets. Usage has made the festival one of peculiar interest to the family, especially to the younger members of the household. And to me it is delightful to walk through the streets as the holiday season approaches and watch the way in which the people of all ages are purchasing something suitable, not for themselves, but for their relatives or friends. In other words, it pleases me to notice how eager they are to get something, not for the sake of getting, but for the joy of giving. Every one is then thinking of some one else, and is then doing what will afford pleasure to some one else. The spirit of the home at Christmas-tide is one of thoughtful kindness, which seeks to give that others may have.

In the second place, Christmas is a social festival. It is distinctly a time for conveying friendly greetings, for expressing friendly feelings and for performing friendly acts. During the period of the festival, the thoughts of men in general go out to one another. The rich think of the poor, the well think of the ill, the comfortable of the afflicted, the fortunate and successful of the unfortunate and unsuccessful. Even selfish and self-centered persons then recognise in some degree their relation to those about them and the claims of such upon them. At this season, too, as at no other, people seem to realise their kinship to the members of their own community, and to cherish a feeling of brothership towards them. That feeling is largely due to the observance of the birthday of the author of our religion, who taught each man to love his neighbour as himself by delighting in his welfare. Jesus regarded mankind as a great family, in which God was the father and all were his children. As children of a common Father, he wished all men to live in peace together as members of a common household; and he exhorted his disciples to be perfect or complete in their benevolence, even as the heavenly Father is perfect or complete in his benevolence, that by so doing they might prove themselves to be his worthy and devoted children. In his view, the human family had no national limitations, but embraced the whole of humanity in its scope. All men being members of one family, all men are brethren, and should feel and act as brethren. The spirit of society at Christmas-tide

is one of brotherly helpfulness, which seeks to help that others may enjoy.

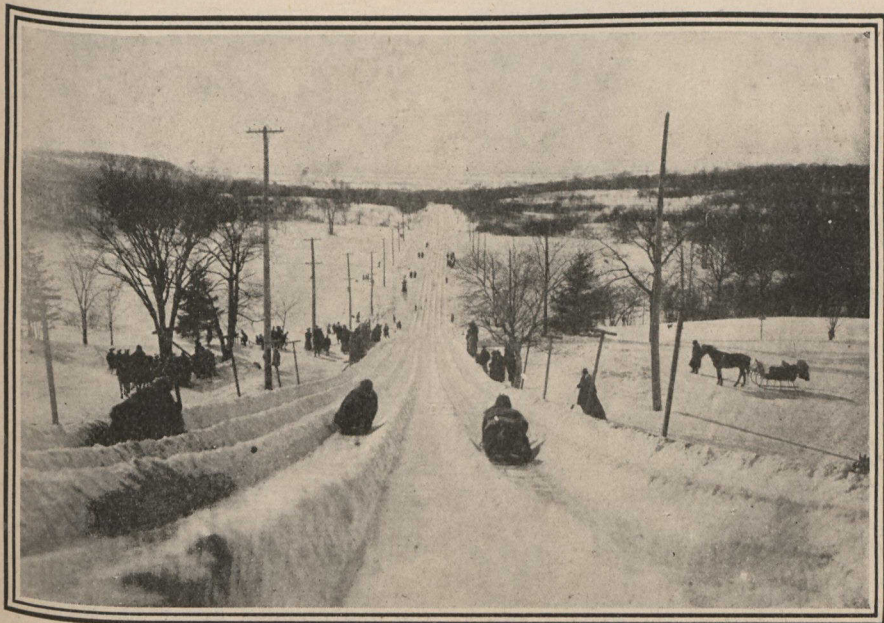
In the third place, Christmas is a religious festival. It is the time when we celebrate the bestowment of God's greatest and best gift. Religion is a reverent acknowledgment of our relation to the Being that prompts goodness and makes for righteousness; and, as a religious festival, Christmas impels us to think both of the character of the giver and of the nature of the gift. Dwelling on the love of God in giving Christ to us, and on the love of Christ in giving himself for us, we are led not only to feel kindly towards others and help them in a brotherly way, but also to see that we must give something of ourselves, as well as our substance, in order to discharge our whole duty towards them. Christ taught in principle and proved by example that "The gift without the giver is bare." He showed, moreover, that a state of society that makes selfishness the rule is irrational and wrong. If we are members one of another, we should not merely give to one another, but live for one another; and be willing not simply to help, but to serve. The spirit of the Church at Christmas-tide is one of disinterested service, which seeks to live and labour that others may be benefited and blessed.

It was this three-fold spirit of love, brotherhood and service that animated the members of the primitive Church; it was this three-fold spirit that developed the great missionary enterprises of modern times, it is this three-fold spirit also that has created a new social and economic conscience, which proclaims equal justice for all men in all relationships, which declares that the few shall not monopolize the bounties that belong to them any, and which insists that no company of men shall accumulate for their own selfish use the means which nature intended for the benefit of the whole state.

Christmas is being observed more widely every year. As a consequence, its usages are becoming more general, and its spirit is getting more intense. I should like, therefore, in conclusion to express the hope that the festivities of the coming season may tend to develop that spirit amongst the readers of the *Courier*, and to wish them, in the truest and best sense of the terms, a peaceful and happy Christmas.

ONE of the most naturally eloquent men in Canada has been appointed to lecture on as dry a subject as could be imagined—the Old Age Annuities Bill. Dr. James Samson is the lecturer. He lives in Windsor. It is a long while since Dr. Samson became known in these peninsular counties as the ablest platform speaker that ever appeared at a political meeting. Dr. Samson is an old man now. He delivered more speeches of one kind or another before he got old, than any other man in Ontario. He was in vogue at every tea-meeting and church sociable, and Sunday School anniversary, harvest home and Christmas tree entertainment in the County of Kent—for in his earlier years he lived in the town of Blenheim, where he started a newspaper known as the *Rondeau News*. One of his first editorials was on Dr. Tanner, the celebrated faster; the article was headed "Nothing in Him."

WINTER SPORTS HAVE BEGUN IN EARNEST



Montreal's Famous Slide which will have a rival this year in Toronto, the Lambton Golf and Country Club having one under way.



Skating in the open air is the finest of all our pastimes—The Montreal A.A.A. Rink.