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The Christmas Tree and its History

By Clement A. Miles.

THE most widespread, and to children the most delightful, of all festal institutions is the Christmas-tree. Its picturesqueness and gay charm have made it spread rapidly all over Europe without roots in national tradition, for, as most people know, it is a German creation, and even in Germany it attained its present immense popularity only in the nineteenth century. To Germany, of course, one should go to see the tree in all its glory. Many people, indeed, maintain that no other Christmas can compare with the German "Weihnacht."

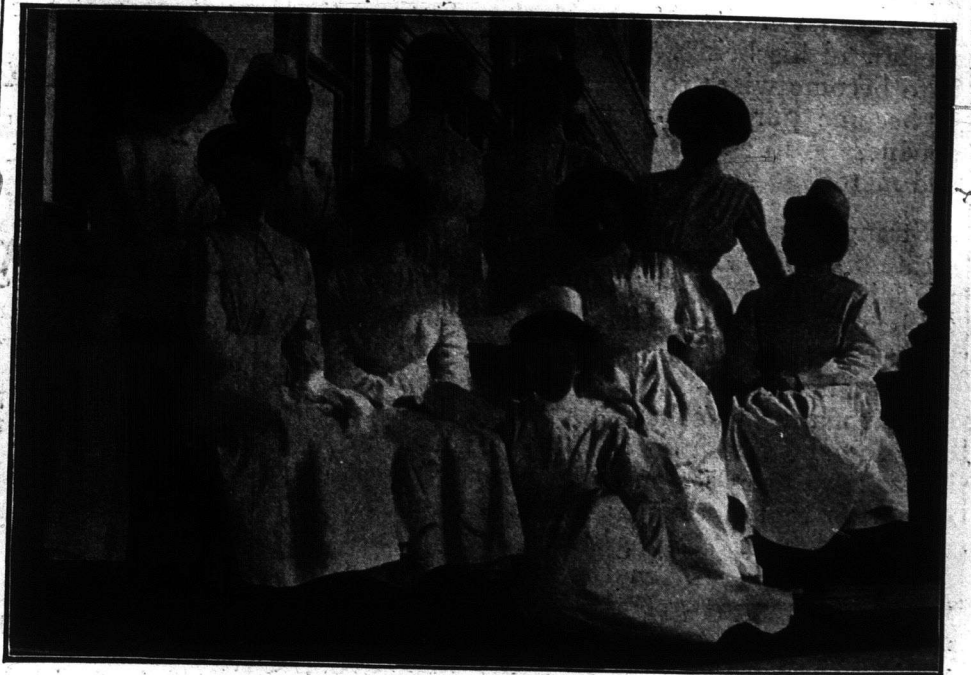
In Germany the Christmas-tree is not a luxury for well-to-do people, but a necessity, the very centre of the festival; no one is too poor or too lonely to have one. There is something about a German "Weihnachtsbaum"—a romance and a wonder—that English Christmas-trees do not possess. For one thing, perhaps, in a land of forests the tree seems more in place; it is a kind of sacrament linking mankind to the mysteries of the woodland. Again the German tree is simply a thing of beauty and radiance; no utilitarian presents hang from its boughs—they are

Germany. In many places, however, it was not common till well on in the eighteenth century; it was a Protestant rather than a Catholic institution, and it made its way but slowly in regions where the older faith was held. Well-to-do townspeople welcomed it first, and the peasantry were slow to adopt it.

In England it is alluded to in 1789, but its use did not become at all general until about the eighteen-forties. In 1840 Queen Victoria and Prince Albert had a Christmas-tree, and the fashion spread until it became completely naturalized.

In Munich, and doubtless elsewhere, the tree appears not only in the church and in the home, but in the cemetery. The graves of the dead are decked on Christmas Eve with holly and mistletoe and a little Christmas-tree with gleaming lights, a touching token of remembrance—an attempt, perhaps, to give the departed a share in the brightness of the festival.

The question of the origin of Christmas trees is of great interest. Though their affinity to other sacraments of the vegetation-spirit is evident, it is difficult to



Group of Nurses on the balcony of St. Joseph's Hospital, Victoria, B.C.

be certain of their exact ancestry. Dr. Tille regards them as coming from a union of two elements: the old Roman custom of decking houses with laurels and green trees at the Kalends of January, and the popular belief that every Christmas Eve apple and other trees blossomed and bore fruit.

Before the advent of the Christmas-tree proper—a fir with lights and ornaments often imitating and always suggesting flowers and fruit—it was customary to put trees like cherry or hawthorn into water or into pots indoors, so that they might bud and blossom at New Year or Christmas. Even today the practice of picking boughs in order that they may blossom at Christmas is to be found in some parts of Austria. The custom may have had to do with legendary lore about the marvelous transformation of Nature on the night of Christ's birth, when the rivers ran wine instead of water, and trees stood in full blossom in spite of ice and snow.

Let us turn to the customs of the Roman Empire which may be in part responsible for the German Christmas-tree. The practice of adorning houses with evergreens at the January Kalends was common throughout the Empire, as we learn from Libanius, Tertullian, and Chrysostom. A grim denunciation of such decorations and the lights which accompanied them may be quoted from Tertullian; it makes a pregnant contrast of pagan and Christian. "Let them," he says of the heathen, "kindle lamps, they who have no light; let them fix on the doorposts laurels which shall afterwards be burnt, they for whom fire is close at hand; meet for them are testimonies of darkness and auguries of punishment. But thou," he says to the Christian,

There is a pretty enough story about the institution of the "Weihnachtsbaum" by Martin Luther: how, after wandering one Christmas Eve under the clear winter sky lit by a thousand stars, he set up for his children a tree with countless candles, an image of the starry heaven whence Christ came down. This, however, belongs to the region of legend; the first historical mention of the Christmas tree is found in the notes of a certain Strasburg citizen of unknown name, written in the year 1605. "At Christmas," he writes, "they set up fir trees in the parlors at Strasburg and hang thereon roses cut out of many-colored paper, apples, wafers, gold-foil, sweets, etc."

With the advance of the eighteenth century notices of the "Weihnachtsbaum" become more frequent: Jung Stilling, Goethe, Schiller, and others mention it, and about the end of the century its use seems to have been fairly general in