

## Presbyterians and Christmas.

BY REV. I. REID HOWATT.

Christmas comes to the typical Presbyterian like a guest he knows not how to greet. He has no objection to the festival; on the contrary, every year he finds himself regarding it more favourably in sundry lights; but yet—the footing is vague. He recalls, for instance, that there was no Christmas before the fourth century; it lacks, therefore, Scripture credential and Apostolic tradition. And when it was instituted it was apparently on lines chosen more for convenience than historicity. The Oriental Church fixed on January 6th, while the Western Church, having a number of old festivals crowding inconveniently close to one another, decreed that Christmas should be spaced off by itself on December 25th; in neither case was there any pretence of commemorative exactitude. If that had been sought for it is possible both these dates might have been put out of court and the verdict been given for the spring-time, since we are expressly told The Birth took place in the lambing season—i. e., when shepherds were “abiding in the field, keeping watch over their flocks by night.” About all this there is a want of reason and right authorization which made our forefathers—men who must grip at something definite—look askance on the festival, and this the more from its being observed on the date of the old pagan festival of the Sunbirth, when the monarch of day began his northward return—the natalis solis of the Romans, the Yule-tide of the Goths. There was here an evident accommodation to pagan customs which might have been politic enough had the matter been secular only, but which could hardly commend its purer and more spiritual import. Our fathers had cause to fear these compromises Rome had been in the habit of making with old paganism, for the old ghost had a way of reasserting its ancient vices under the new garments, as witness the grave historian:—“From the first institution of this festival the Western nations seem to have transferred to it many of the follies and censurable practices which prevailed in the pagan festivals of the same season, such as adorning the churches fantastically, mingling puppet shows and dramas with worship, universal feasting, merry-making, visits and salutations, presents and jocularities, revelry and drunkenness”—a mixty-maxy not yet altogether eliminated. The mind has only to go out on the one hand to Rome’s paper-manger, pasteboard angels in pasteboard attitudes of adoration, with the Bambino in its swaddling clothes, and on the other hand to London, Berlin or New York on Christmas night, to see how the ancient pagan ghost still gibbers and mows under the new and holier name.

But while the Puritan frown, so long and so steadfastly set against the festival of The Nativity, had reason on its side, there is now evidence enough of the frown relaxing at least into a tolerant smile, and this not because any principle has been abandoned, but because the complexity of human nature is coming to be more fairly recognized. The brook must taste of the soils through which its waters have percolated, and even the pure things of the tabernacle must to the

end carry suggestions on them of the wilderness way through which they have been borne. Goth and Vandal have left their stamp on the days of the week, and a fairly sized pantheon of Greek and Roman gods is packed up in the names of our months, but no one counts Christianity to be in peril because associated with the Sun-day or the Moon-day, or two-faced Janus or hellicose Mars. These are but knots in the log-line, or flavours of soil lying away back in the centuries; they neither make nor mar the faith itself. That something of this broader view is beginning to soften the austerity with which Puritanism so long regarded Christmas may be taken for granted when we see how the festival is being celebrated more and more every year, not only by Free Churches in England, but even by sturdy Presbyterians in Scotland. In the head it is still ear-marked as unhistorical and uncanonical, but in the heart it is finding a kindlier welcome as a thing most worthy and suitable in itself.

Nor is it difficult to see why so much that is very human—feasting and merry-making—should cling to Christmas as it does not cling, say, to Good Friday or Easter. What these latter signify strikes straight home even on the dullest, but the grand and comforting doctrine of the Incarnation, beyond its patent and homely aspects, has subtle, psychological bearings not readily understood of the common people. The very language in which these have to be propounded is uncouth in the general ear, and if it is difficult enough for the trained theologian so to steer through Apollinarian, Eutychian, and Lutheran rocks as to avoid fatal issues at Calvary through mistakes at Bethlehem, how much more difficult must it be for the ordinary and unversed hearer or reader to grasp the far-reaching significance of the Divine immanence in the race? To the end, while even sanctified human nature remains in the mass as it is, the doctrine of the Incarnation will always appeal most readily to the family and the social instinct. It is, then, for the Church to recognize this, and seek to consecrate and guide it. Everywhere there is the desire of the heart to celebrate The Event on Which all our other hopes impinge, and if, in doing this, there should be an admixture of very human, albeit unecclasiastical, nature, yet so long and so far as it makes for goodwill and fraternity among men, it should be more than recognized: it should be sanctioned.

The benign and solvent brotherliness of this festival is seen whenever we cast our eyes over wider zones than our own home or Church life. Our soldiers on the veldt, covenanted and uncovenanted civilians in India, loneliest squatters in the colonies and voyagers on the most distant waters, all draw closer to each other at this time with cheery greetings and fraternal feastings—and wherefore not? At home it is the time when the poorest of the poor may confidently look for one comfortable meal and some touch of warmth. That is should be specially the children’s time carries its warrant on its face; it is a poor heart that does not aim at making some child happier for the coming of the Christ-Kind. The message for all is the open heart of helpfulness, for His sake Who came among us at

this time. He came, having nothing, needing all, that He might slip a blessing into the heart which was unlocked to serve Him. And so He slips it still.—London (Eng.) Presbyterian.

## Literary Notes.

Around the Yule Log by Willis Boyd Allen. This is a collection of Christmas stories, all very bright and well written, and illustrated in the margin in a rather unique manner. Both matter and cover are very seasonable, the latter being yellow linen, ornamented with holly. The Pilgrim Press, Boston and Chicago.

Sacred Songs No. 2 by Ira D. Sankey, James McGranahan and Geo. C. Stebbins. This new book of sacred songs will be specially appreciated by church choirs and Sunday Schools, as it contains a large number of beautiful new sacred songs. It is issued in a cheap music edition with board covers. The Copp, Clark Company, Toronto.

Cyrus, the Magician, a story of magic in the Workshop of Diana and the Gospel in Asia, by David Beaton. The object of this book is to show the difference between the imposture of charlatan and the open reasonableness of the supernatural power of Jesus, but apart from this didactic aim we have here a very interesting book which takes us back almost two thousand years. The story is well written and nicely illustrated, and is neatly bound in green cloth. The Pilgrim Press, Boston, Chicago.

The King’s Lyrics. This little volume is a companion volume to the Queen’s Garland, and is a collection of lyrical poems of the time of James I and Charles I. It includes poems of Milton, Richard Lovelace, George Herbert, Robert Herrick, and many other writers. The poetry of this period is delightful in its quaintness and abundance of sentiment. The volume is exquisite, bound in brown and gold and illustrated with a number of beautiful reproductions of old prints. R. H. Russell, New York.

Suspense by H. S. Merriman. This book, while not up to the level of *The Sowers*, is still a very striking one. There is something peculiar about it, in that there are practically only five characters, only three of which are developed to any extent. The book strikes one as being sketchy and we have a feeling of incompleteness, but the characters of the hero and heroine and that of Mrs. Wylie are wonderfully depicted. There is always in Merriman’s characters a certain reserve force and subtle strength which is difficult to put into words, but is felt in all their actions. Those who have read Merriman’s other books will be anxious to read this also, and it will be of general interest at the present time as the hero is a war correspondent. The volume is bound neatly in a light linen and the paper and printing are excellent. Copp, Clark & Company, Toronto.

Ione March by S. R. Crockett. Mr. Crockett’s versatility is certainly marvellous. Last year he surprised those who thought his art was confined to the kail-yard by writing that capital romance of mediæval Europe, “The Red Axe,” and now he comes out with a bright, crisp, up-to-date story of the modern American girl which is simply charming. Ione March is a strong character. The daughter of a famous American Governor, she has been educated in a European convent, and so combines the energy, independence and adaptability of the American with a dignified refinement which is very pleasing; while her sweet womanliness is only brought out more strongly by her struggles with the world in the effort to earn a living for herself. The plot is well constructed and well carried out. There are also some splendid specimens of English manhood, and a “mean American,” who, though playing an important part, does not appear often. But the life of the story is Idalia Judd, the typical American girl, who talks like a streak in the most delightfully expressive “American.” The reader will be interested in every chapter of this book, though it is not at all like what we usually get from Crockett. Ione March is a new departure for Crockett, and while it will be read by many, it will not be so popular as his other works.—Copp, Clark Company, Toronto.