



A PRESENT-LESS CHRISTMAS

“CHRISTMAS was all right,” said the middle-aged bachelor, “until someone began writing it

Xmas with an X, the emblem of a ten dollar bill. From that time on, Christmas deteriorated into a kind of trade-festival. We prepare for Christmas with an orgie of shopping. Crowds surge through the streets and shops preparing for the great day and on the 25th of December we naturally expect things to reach a climax, but they don't—not for a grouchy old bachelor at least. I know it will be much the same as usual—a hectic exchange of gifts, a hearty dinner and a heavy family re-union. Now in the good old days . . .”

“When you were young?” we interrupted.

“Dear me, no! Not that all days are not good when one is young—and especially Christmas day—but I refer to the sixteenth century or thereabouts, when the Lord of Misrule or Abbot of Unreason was appointed to superintend the Christmas revels at Court and in the houses of the wealthy. Of course it was a religious festival as well, and is still, but you must admit that, apart from that, Christmas has been entirely given over to the children, and even they don't know how to keep it properly. They think nothing of Christmas carols, dances and games, they do nothing but play with their presents all day long and stuff themselves with sweets. It is the great family day—as if people didn't get enough of their families every day!”

“But wasn't it a 'family day' in the olden times?”

“Yes and no. Families were worthy of the name in those days. You didn't find four adoring grand-parents, two parents and five or six maiden aunts and bachelor uncles all playing Santa Claus to one overfed infant. It was the style then to marry early and often and to yearly increase the population. The old squire and his family and more distant relatives celebrated Christmas with their servants and tenants, and that made it worth while to keep the timely festival as it should be kept with feasting and merry-making, the traditional roast boar's head, the yule log, holly and mistletoe.

“We try to perpetuate some old customs with our imported holly and mistletoe, keeping the letter but not the spirit of our ancestors, who wreathed their doorways and windows with greens from their own domains. Perhaps it is because they are so expensive that we use them—boughs of scented pine and balsam are much more decorative, but we must keep the X in Xmas! The mistletoe, especially, is so expensive that one poor yellowish spray is made to do the work of a luxuriant bough, for it was customary for each couple who kissed under the mistletoe to remove a berry from the bough, but if that were practised in modern times only the early birds would get the berries—and the girls would never allow that!

“No. The present Christmas is all wrong. I use the word present in its double meaning. If people stopped the exchange of presents they might find some other way to worthily celebrate the greatest festival of the year. The most successful attempts have been the com-

munity Christmas trees in a public park where the large and beautifully lighted tree, and the Christmas carols, can be enjoyed by all the citizens, young and old, rich and poor, on Christmas eve.

“Of course there are any amount of Christmas trees for various charities, but these are rarely held on Christmas day. We are much too selfish for that. The great day is sacred to our own families, and any day in the week before or the week after Christmas is thought suitable for the poor. Indeed, one tree with its decorations, frequently circulates amongst the various charitable organizations and the poor children circulate with it. They look upon Christmas as a time to receive presents—the more the merrier—so the attendance at Sunday schools, mothers' meetings and various juvenile organizations, increases greatly about the middle of December, and greedy little hands are held out for more and more.

“Santa Claus was a beautiful fairy so long as he was surrounded by mystery, but when he visited every family Christmas tree and talked with the voice of Father or Uncle through cotton wool whiskers, his glory faded, and when he took up his abode in various department stores, his charm vanished forever. The children see him surrounded with outrageously expensive toys and some of the less timid ones will tell him that they want this or that (which is usually marked with an X or a V), so the poor mother in self defence has to destroy the

illusion and explain that the real Santa Claus can only bring gifts for which Daddy can afford to pay.

“We can't expect the little ones to display hilarious joy at the receipt of a Victory Bond; we can't give them expensive toys as well; a few of us may be too sensible to buy cheap trash that will fall to pieces before the end of the day, and so, what are we to do? Can't we give them a good time in other ways, teach them Christmas carols and let them go about like waits—why, it would be a great lark! Get up Christmas pantomimes, masquerades, tableaux! Revive the old customs! Let them remember the Child of the Manger, whose birthday they are celebrating. To be sure He got presents: gold and frankincense and myrrh—whatever that may be. It sounds more like a Victory Bond than a toy, something that would be nice for a kid to have in the long run, instead of the drum, the train of cars and the fireman's helmet.

“But then, I'm only a crusty old bachelor, and when Christmas eve comes I'll probably sneak down town and buy a lot of cheap dolls and lead soldiers for my sister Mary's children—though they have trunks full of toys already. Next day I shall probably sleep late, over-eat at the family party, and then spend the rest of the day watching the kids play with their presents—in keeping with our national traditions.”

HE was a crusty old bachelor and talked largely for the sake of talking, but the mother, whose name was Mary, heard these things and pondered them in her heart, and as a result of her meditations her family have planned a present-less Christmas. The children are as keen about it as anyone. I think they have a suspicion that though their father and mother may be delinquent in the matter of present-giving, the postman will provide them with the pleasure of opening parcels.

In company with some of their little friends they are learning Christmas carols and early on Christmas morning, when their little neighbors are opening their stockings, they will be surprised to hear the sound of voices, beneath their windows. First they will sing:

“God rest you merry gentlemen,
Let nothing you dismay,
For remember Christ our Saviour
Was born on Christmas Day.”

They will also sing “Gloria in Excelsis” and Herrick's lovely carol with the famous verses:

“Why does the chilling winter's morn
Smile like a field beset with corn?
Or smell like a mead new shorn,
Thus on the sudden?”

“We see Him come and know Him ours
Who with His sunshine and His showers,
Turns all the patient ground to flowers.”

Perhaps their friends will mistake them for real waits and fling them pennies, perhaps they will recognize them and drag them in with screams of laughter.

Then after a hot breakfast there will be



“Teach them Christmas carols and let them go about like waits.”