

in pagan or papal antiquity. The very date of Christmas was probably determined by the great Celtic or Teuton Yule-feast of the winter solstice, a commemoration of their heathen gods. The first historic trace we find of it is about the time of the Emperor Commodus (180-192 A. D.). But at first it was a moveable feast like Easter, being held in January, April, or May, by different Churches.

The use of holly and mistletoe in Christmas decoration is a relic of druidical superstition, these being sacred to Balder, the Sun-god, and therefore employed as a spell against evil spirits. The pleasant custom of Christmas gifts is a reminiscence of the offerings of the Magi to the infant Christ. St. Nicholas, dear to all children as Santa Claus, was a wealthy Greek, living in Constantinople, who at Christmas time gave rich presents to the poor. For his piety he was canonized in the Greek Church, and became the patron saint of Russia and the patron friend of children throughout the world.

Some of the beautiful Christmas customs of the German people are described by an accomplished contributor upon another page. It is an ancient superstition, which we should think would speedily yield to experiment, that if you go into a stable at midnight on Christmas eve, you shall find the cattle on their knees in homage to their Maker.

To another superstition Shakespeare makes Marcellus refer in the play of "Hamlet," on hearing the crowing of a cock:

"Some say, that ever 'gainst that season comes  
Wherein our Saviour's birth is celebrated,  
This bird of dawning singeth all night long :  
And then they say no spirit dares stir abroad ;  
The nights are wholesome : then no planets strike,  
No fairy takes, nor witch hath power to charm,  
So hallowed and so gracious is the time."

Christmas has ever been a favourite theme of the poets; indeed it was one of the unfulfilled dreams of our youth to edit a volume of Christmas songs, chansons, and roundelays. But no singer has ever presented such a noble offering to the incarnate Lord as the blind bard of the "Paradise Lost," in his sublime "Hymn on the Nativity:"