

A Christmas in the West Indies.

written expressly for the Recorder.

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Christmas is Christmas all the world over. It is a season of festivity and rejoicing from one end of the world to the other; yet this fact does not exclude the possibility of contrast. There is a wonderful amount of difference between a Canadian Christmas, with its usual accompaniment of snow, ice, temperature below zero, and general winter surroundings; and Christmas in the West Indies, accompanied by bright warm sunshine, rolling green fields, gardens in full bloom, and general summer surroundings.

Among many other characteristics that go to make up the representative West Indian, the capacity for whole-souled enjoyment stands prominent. Generally speaking, he is a light hearted, smiling, free-from-care individual, who instinctively looks on the bright side, and doesn't see the force of taking life too seriously, living out his own proverb, "Feast to-day, famine to-morrow." When such a festive season comes round, he lets himself free for the occasion, and whether he lives in ease and comfort, having the traditional turkey and plum pudding Christmas, or whether he lives in an 8x10 thatched hut, with a salt-fish and plantain Christmas dinner, he will make his Christmas a time of merry making and enjoyment.

The scene of the Christmas I am about to try to describe, is laid in the island of Antigua, the seat of government and capital of the group of West Indian Islands, known as "The Leeward Islands."

Christmas day in the West Indies commences very early. About 4 o'clock a.m., and while it is yet dark, the people are stirring, and the lights begin to flicker here and there, telling that the people are abroad.

Probably about this hour a group of carol singers will assemble at the front of the house and keep up the time-honored custom of singing Xmas hymns and carols. It is a strangely interesting group, and if one is curious enough to get up to see who these early visitors may be, he will probably find a dozen or so boys, variously dressed, with or without coats and shoes and stockings, (among the poorer class, shoes and stockings are decidedly "Sunday clothes" and a luxury).

If you are sufficiently awake you will find their singing well worth listening to, for the West Indian is as full of music as a pumpkin is full of meat—to use his own simile.

From 4.30 a.m. to 5, you will hear the Church bells ringing, announcing the hour for 5 o'clock service. Of all the distinctive features that mark a West Indian Christmas this, I think, is the most interesting and inspiring; then, and at the Watchnight service on Old Year's night, all the churches are crowded, whatever the congregations are during the rest of the year.

The West Indian loves something unusual, and out of the ordinary; you can always get a better congregation at 5 o'clock in the morning or 12 o'clock at

night than at any usual hour during the 24.

A West Indian Xmas morning service is something never to be forgotten; the large massive brick church is crowded, close on 2,000 people are in attendance waiting for the signal to arise and sing, as only a West Indian congregation can sing. Let us first take a glance at the congregation. In the body of the church you will see some of the best people of the city—merchants, lawyers, editors; then the better class of working people—clerks, estate overseers, etc., and in the

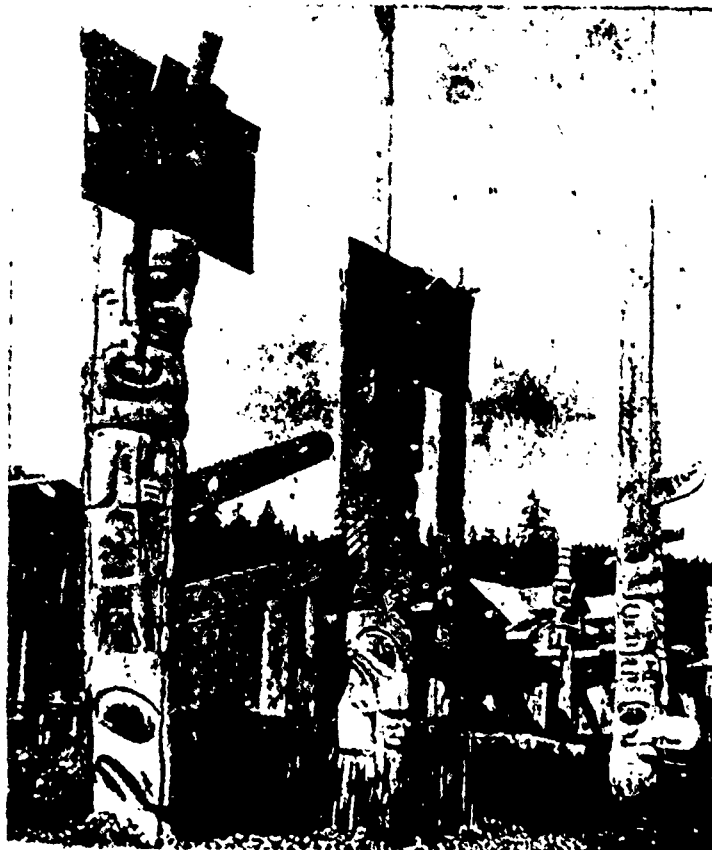
Whereon the Saviour of mankind was born;

Rise to adore the mystery of love

Which hosts of angels chanted from above;

With them the joyful tidings first begun
Of God incarnate and the Virgin's Son."

Then the people rise to their feet and sing—sing with their whole soul. You will not find any members of that congregation standing listlessly holding a hymn book and never uttering a sound. The power of the music carries every one before it, and even the few who cannot sing must needs try. The influence is irresistible and overpowering. It fills one's whole soul and plays upon the susceptible nerves like a master musician upon the sympathetic strings of his beloved instrument. No Xmas morning service among West Indian Methodists would be acceptable that did not begin with that hymn, and it never seems to be so full of meaning and power as it does sung just then, as this day of days is once more breaking upon the



TOTEM OR CREST POLES.

galleries and at the back of the church the people are massed together. They are dressed neatly, but without any regard for fashion. The women wear loose cotton gowns and their hair is tied up in a large handkerchief in place of hat or bonnet. The men and boys may have coats on, but collars and ties are exceptional. The people are sitting most quietly, waiting for the minister to appear and service to begin. At 5 o'clock, just as day is beginning to break, the minister enters the pulpit and announces that grand Xmas morning hymn of Dr. Byron's:

"Christmas awake, salute the happy morn,

world of sorrow and strife, repeating the God-sent message—"On earth peace, good will toward men."

The service generally lasts from 5 to 6, and after service there is the usual hearty handshaking and exchange of good wishes. Everyone is glad to-day, and though many of them have only the very meagrest and poorest of homes to return to, they have caught the spirit of gladness that is abroad, and with their innate faculty for abandoning themselves to the influence of the hour, they are enjoying Xmas morning to the full. It would pay you, and interest you, to mingle among that dispersing congregation; there are many characters, quaint,