

## Christmas in Many Countries.

### Origin of the Day, Etc.

Strange indeed does it seem that Christmas, one of the most prominent festivals of the Christian year, should have its origin in pagan festivities. "Strange," we say, and yet upon second thought, we find that other festivals of the Christian year may be traced to the same source. Easter, the sacred festival that commemorates the resurrection of the Christ, is an outgrowth of an old pagan festival held in the month of April in honor of the Goddess of Spring. Other Christian festivals have had their birth in Hebrew or pagan rites, and so we find our Christmas celebrations to be far older than Christianity itself.

The barbarous Teutons the Ancient Egyptians, the early Greeks and Romans, centuries before the birth of Christ, held high festival on the twenty-first of December, the date of the winter solstice. The twenty-fifth of December was regarded by the early Church as the day of Christ's birth and its anniversary kept with sacred rites. As Christianity spread, we find that the great days of pagan worship were merged into those of the Christian religion that happened to occur about the same day of the month. Many of the pagan rites and observances were retained, but with a higher and deeper significance.

The joyousness of the Heathen solstice festival remained a part of the Christian festival, but in place of being a mere making upon the occasion of the turning of the sun, the good cheer took on a spiritual meaning of ethical and religious import. "Glory to God in the Highest and on earth peace, good will toward men," became the sentiment that formed a sweet, grave background for all the jollity and quips and cranks that had formerly belonged to the purely pagan festival.

Our Christian carols are an outgrowth of the wild hymns sung by the ancient Romans at the Saturnalia, a feast held on the seventeenth of December in honor of the God Saturn. This ancient feast was kept with the wildest of merriment as a celebration of the end of the toil of the year, when the harvests had been gathered in.

The holly and mistletoe were used as emblems by the "druids of old" in their mystic and savage rites. The mistletoe especially is a horsey emblem, connected for ages with December feasts. In the feast of the Saturnalia it figured even to a greater extent than that at our Christmas banquets. The Scandinavians revered it as being the material from which the arrow was made with which their sun-god, Balder, was slain. The druids regarded it as sacred because it grew upon the holy oak, and at the time of the winter solstice, in ceremonious processions they proceeded to the wood where the mistletoe grew. It was gathered by the priests in greatest reverence, and afterwards distributed to the people in small bits. These little sprays of mistletoe were hung over the house entrance as an offering to the deities of the woods. The modern significance of the mistletoe is a survival of the customs of the ancient Saturnalia.

Even in the words associated with the celebration of our Christmas feast we can find a survival of the past. For instance, in the words yuletide and yule-log we have the ancient Gothic and Saxon word "yule," meaning the festival of the winter solstice.

The custom of burning the yule-log came originally from the Scandinavians, who at the feast of the winter solstice kindled great fires in honor of Thor. The yule-log still has its part in Christmas ceremonies in some districts of England. With shouting and song, the huge log is dragged into the festive hall. Soon its bright flames and merry crackling add to the joyousness of the occasion.

A favorite old yule-tide song runs as follows:—

Welcome be thou, heavenly king,  
Welcome born on this morning,  
Welcome for whom we shall sing  
Welcome Yule.

We might, had we time, tell of numerous other Christmas customs that have their roots in heathenism; but we have before us instances enough to show us how vitally our lives are linked with the far away past, how akin all nations are over the face of the old earth.

Our times are but the outgrowth of the times of old. Yet, let us not blame the times of old for our defects. Let us rather bless them for the richness of our inheritance.

#### Christmas in Old England.

Far back in the dim vista of the past we see visions of the Christmas days when the world was young. Just as children make the bright and happy joyousness of our Christmas season, so the simple child-like nature of the ancient Briton, Saxon, Norman, is the source from which all the merrymaking of the world's Christmas celebrations has come. We of to-day are of a somewhat graver type of character, sensing the sweet seriousness of the laying of more stress upon its deeper significance.

It is not that our far away ancestors did not recognize the deep truth that the Christmas feast stands for, but the good cheer of the season appealed more

The spirit of the Roundhead made itself felt even across the waters in America, for we find the Court of Massachusetts in 1659 decreeing that "anybody who is found observing abstinence from labor, feasting or in any other way any such day as Christmas Day shall pay for every such offense five shillings."

The English Parliament passed an ordinance in 1652 for Christmas Day of that year not to be kept. It had decreed that holly and ivy were "seditious badges." The Parliament upon this occasion resolved to sit on Christmas Day. A commentator upon this fact remarks with truth that they doubtless had the surely satisfactory time that gloomy religionists of any time or clime enjoy.

#### Christmas in Germany.

Christmas is heralded in Germany by greens hung from every window and door and garlands spread upon the walks. The Christmas tree which forms so important a part of the German Christmas is kept behind closed doors during its decoration, and the mysteries which "die Mutter" has been preparing are not revealed until the appointed time. At six o'clock on Christmas Eve, the time of suspense is over. The children dance wildly round the lighted trees, and all the warmth of the German family life is at its highest. Christmas Day itself is spent in friendly visits, ending in the evening with music and dancing.

In Germany at some important remote date the first Christmas tree fig-

of peace will be restored by the time another Christmas dawns and that these simple-hearted people may enjoy in their own way the rights that God has given.

#### Bits of Christmas History.

Christmas of 1525 was known in England as "still Christmas." At this time King Henry VIII, happened to be ill and the usual Christmas rejoicing and singing of carols was forbidden. When we recall the times of terror during the reign of the House of Tudor, we can hardly conceive of any real rejoicing, even at the happy Christmas-time. Every Christmas of this period in England's history might well have been a "still Christmas," so far as any real Christmas spirit was concerned. The songs of any period of a country's history reflect the spirit of the times, and we may catch this reflection from the following bit of a carol written during the Tudor reign:

My sweet little baby, what mean'st thou to cry?  
Be still, my blessed babe, though cause thou hast to mourn,  
Whose blood most innocent the cruel king hath sworn  
And lo! alas! behold! What slaughter he doth make,  
Shedding the blood of infants all, sweet Saviors, for Thy sake.  
A king is born, they say, which King this king would kill:  
Oh! woe, and woful heavy, when wretches have their will.

The custom of singing carols while going from house to house on Christmas Eve and begging Christmas boxes is centuries old. This begging became so troublesome that it was prohibited by law in London.

About the year 1562 the carol changed from a song of revelry and hilarity to one of rather solemn tone. Later, psalms were arranged to be sung as carols. Here are some verses of a carol that voice the spirit of cheer and hospitality:

Lo, now is come our joyful'st feast!  
Let every man be jolly!  
Each room with ivy leaves is drest,  
And every post with holly.  
Without the door let sorrow lie,  
And if for cold it hap to die,  
We'll bury it in a Christmas pye,  
And evermore be merry.

The refrain of another carol is:

At Christmas be merry and thankful  
withal,  
And treat thy poor neighbors, the great  
with the small.

There is no certain trace of the celebration of the Nativity until nearly two hundred years after the death of Christ. The singing of sacred music began with the earliest celebrations. The earlier carols were called "manger songs."

#### Christmas in Canada.

We must not close without a word or two regarding our own Canadian Christmas. It has sometimes been said that a spirit of commercialism pervades our holiday season to such an extent that there is no room in heart or head for thought of the significance of the season. But is not that the spirit that dominates largely in all countries? The gay shops at this season in Paris, Berlin, London and New York testify to this fact. This very stir in the business life of every little village and town in all trade centres of large cities has grown to be a part of the Christmas celebration. We may say in regard to this that commercialism in itself can cause no harm. Let the heart of the buyer and seller be right and all transactions may be a tendency with us to overstep the line in favor of commercialism; but our crowded churches on Christmas day bear testimony to the fact that we have not altogether forgotten the truth for which Christmas stands. How can Christmas in cosmopolitan Canada be described?

The English, Scotch or Irish Canadians tend to keep the festival as did their ancestors. The German Canadians keep it in accord with their native customs, and so we might continue to state in reference to Canadians sprung from other nationalities.

Here in Western Canada where people of all nationalities have gathered together to form a part of a great country, we possess the heritage of all that is best of the world's growth; so in keeping Christmas, whatever the nationality of our forefathers, may we remember the richness of our common inheritance, and in the midst of our Christmas joys forget not why we are joyful.



On Santa Claus's picket-line.

to the state of mental and spiritual development. They were the children of the race, we are the youth. As the youth does not lose all the love for the things of childhood, so we have not lost our love for the simple joys of Christmas time, but consciously or unconsciously we are more absorbed with the divine significance of the truth of the incarnation of God into us and within us.

So much to account for the wild hilarity with which Christmas was celebrated by old England in centuries past. The festivities began on the sixteenth of December and lasted till January sixth, the date of the historic Twelfth-Night. The revelries at court were splendid as well as gay. Open house was kept throughout the realm. Banquets, carnivals and general carousing were the order of the day. The office of the Lord of Mis-Rule brought about much of the license of the old Roman Saturnalia.

Of the simpler joys of these old mention—the wreaths of holly and of mistletoe, the great yule-log and the family feasts.

At the time of the ascendancy of Puritanism much of the free wild spirit of the English Christmas was crushed, and it seems to have never fully revived. In 1643 the Roundhead Parliament abolished the observance of Christmas, and for twelve years Christmas as a general holiday was not kept.

ured as part of the Christmas celebration.

#### In Paris.

Here we find the same general rejoicing and family gatherings, but a distinctive feature of the French Christmas is the gaiety of the Grand Boulevard.

The Cafes are resplendent in their preparation for the Christmas Eve supper, a much more important affair in the eyes of Paris than is the Christmas dinner.

#### In Russia.

In face of the terrible scenes of riot and bloodshed that are daily occurring in the heart of Russia as the Christmas-tide draws near, one almost refrains from referring to the happy peace and quiet of a Russian village Christmas; but the following very pretty customs in the rural districts of Russia must not be passed by without notice.

The village folk assemble in the main street of the village, form in decorous procession, and proceed to the stately houses of the village, singing their Christmas carols. At sunset a table is spread. Simple cakes and fish and the ever-present samovar are the features of the feast. A blessed water is divided among the people. Later in the evening simple gifts are distributed.

We can only hope that some measure