

The ORIGIN of some of our CHRISTMAS CUSTOMS



It is apt, most of us, to observe the customs and traditions of the Yuletide with the feeling that they had their birth with the first of the greatest festivals of Christendom. The Christmas tree, the gift giving, the candles, the holly and the mistletoe have become so identified with our celebration of Christmas that they seem as inherent and peculiar to it as the radiant points to the Star of the Nativity. And yet it is to antiquity and heathendom that we owe the customs we observe, the stock phrases we utter and even the mince pie, without which no Christmas dinner is complete. The Germans, the Scandinavians, the Jews, the Romans, the Goths and the Saxons have all contributed to make our Christmas festival.

"Merry Christmas!" It is on our lips from the stroke of twelve that ends the vigil of Christmas eve until the last candle has burned out on Christmas night. If we think of it at all we accept "merry" as meaning lively, sprightly and gleesome and wonder a bit perhaps at its preference. As a matter of fact when the English first used the old Saxon word in this connection, spelling it "merrie," it meant simply pleasant and agreeable, but we cling to it in spite of its changed character.

The day before Christmas we bring into the house a great fir tree that is made the center of the festivities. It is an old German legend that has provided us with this pretty custom. Saint Wilfrid, the tale runs, was one day cutting down one of the sacred oaks of the Druids. Presently a great wind seized it and it fell, split in four pieces. Behind it Saint Wilfrid saw a young fir tree standing staunch and unharmed, pointing a green spire to the heavens. He thereupon proclaimed it a holy tree and the tree of the Christ child because its leaves were evergreen and its majestic spire

pointed heavenward. He asked the people to gather about it in their own homes, where it should shelter nothing but loving gifts.

On Christmas eve we illuminate the tree with many flickering candles—unless we prefer safety to sentiment, when we make use of the electric lighted devices. One may choose among several picturesque accounts of the origin of this practice. In medieval times when the forests seemed peopled with none but sacred trees, there was a tradition of particular holiness being invested in an illuminated tree. Then the ancient Jews held a Feast of Light about Christmas time in which candles were an important feature, so that their use may oddly enough have been thus adopted by the Christians. The huge Yule candle signified the coming of the light into the world. The most beautiful idea is that our use of candles is derived from the fact that probably when Christ was born twinkling lights were burning in every house.

The holly and mistletoe indispensable for holiday decoration were originally identified with pagan festivals. There is a tradition that holly is the bush in which Jehovah appeared to Moses. The mistletoe was an object of great veneration to the Druids, although only when it grew upon an oak tree. The propriety of kissing under the mistletoe is a relic of an old Scandinavian myth. It seems that Balder, the Apollo of the North, was hated by one Loki because "everything that springs from fire, air, earth and water" had given promise not to hurt the former handsome gentleman. Whoever it was had thus coerced all things of the earth and sea, had somehow neglected to mention the matter to the insignificant mistletoe. So Loki straightway made an arrow of mistletoe, and being an unprincipled chap induced blind Höder to shoot Balder. Little good it did him, however, for the gods restored Balder to

life at once and presented the mistletoe to the Goddess of Love to keep. Everyone who passed under it received a kiss to show that it was the emblem of love, and not death. The popularity of mistletoe was unabated for centuries, but one old writer says: "Mistletoe was abandoned in the Christmas decking of churches together with kissing at the services, because both were found to set the young ladies and young gentlemen a-reading of the marriage service."

And dear old Santa Claus, or Saint Nicholas, or Kris Kringle, as you prefer—what delightful myths from antiquity have presented him with his reindeer and his whisks and pack of toys! The Scandinavian legend relates the coming of Odin, the winter god, who visited earth at the time of the Winter Solstice or Feast. Odin rode a white horse and preceded by wolves and ravens was supposed to lead an army of souls that had died during the year. As Christianity triumphed it was only over the unbalanced that he was thought to have power, and his army came to be composed only of the souls of children to whom he became a friend. Eventually he was said to bring the toys and gifts to the children on earth. We are satisfied now to tell the children that he comes down the chimney with his pack of gifts and disappears without being beheld by mortal eye. In a little Moravian village in Emaus, Pennsylvania, which is the only place in this country where the custom is thus observed, St. Nicholas, or Pelzmickel, is yearly impersonated by some villager, and visits every household on Christmas eve to distribute gifts.

The mince pie is a survival of the immense pies that the early Christians used to make in the form of a cradle or manger. After several centuries the pies were made smaller in size, but were still made to carry on the idea of the manger in a sort of coffin shape.

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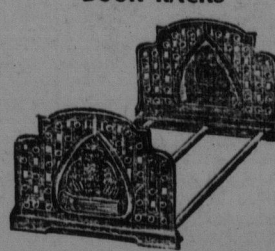
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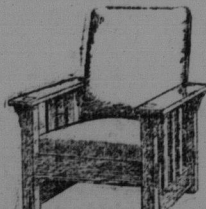
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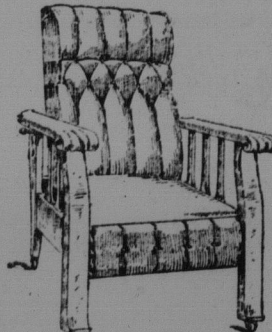
Parlor Chairs, inlaid back, Mahg. finished, silk covered, any shade, \$9.00.



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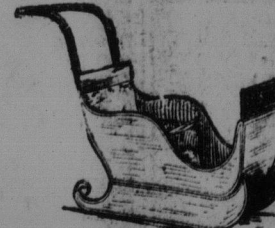
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