

KEEPING CHRISTMAS

A Christmas Card

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KEEPING CHRISTMAS :

A Christmas Card

BY

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WITH A FRONTISPIECE

BY

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KEEPING CHRISTMAS



“CHRISTMAS comes but once a year” were the words familiar and dear to English childhood. They were uttered by the bands of mummers who came into the halls of the gentry on Christmas Eve to exhibit their rude traditional disguises and play their uncouth antics, earning thereby the half-crowns wherewith to make themselves a merry Christmas. If you had traced the pedigree of the mummers, probably you would have found that they, like Punch, represented the actors of some mediæval mystery or morality play, now fallen in its estate, since the Church of the Middle Ages, with all its sacred pageantry and dramaturgy, had passed away. Punch will die only with Shakespeare, but the mummers probably by this time the policeman of a refined civilization has ordered to “move on.” Besides the roughness and absurdity of the exhibition, these fooleries enacted by the lower class to amuse the upper class and draw money from them did smack somewhat of the old *régime*, and even reminded one a little of

the Saturnalia of the Roman slave. More than two centuries before, Puritanism had banished forever the Lord of Misrule, under whose reign of tipsy jollity and folly the lawyers of the Temple were once fined for having failed to perform their customary dance before the judges. The Lord of Misrule, while he lasted, was kept up in a style incredibly elaborate and expensive. He had a mimic court, with officers answering to those of the real court, and for a season ruled the realm of pleasure as absolutely as the monarch whom he counterfeited and for an hour supplanted ruled the State. Mr. Francis Vivian, Lord of Misrule or Christmas Prince in the reign of Charles I., spent £2,000, equivalent probably to \$100,000 now, on the maintenance of his mock dignity, besides his allowance from the Crown. To all this the more serious and austere spirit which was then gaining ascendancy in Merrie England was fatal, and the Restoration, though it brought back the May pole, failed to revive such laborious and thoroughly antiquated tomfoolery as the reign of the Lord of Misrule. "Our Christmas Lord of Misrule," says Prynne, "together with dancing, masques, mummeries, stage-playing, and such other Christmas disorders now in use with Christians, were derived from these Roman Saturnalia and Bacchanalian festivals, which should cause all pious Christians eternally to abominate them."

The words are quoted in Mr. Hervey's "Book of Christmas," where all the lore concerning the Lord of Misrule will be found. Prynne is right in connecting the reign of Misrule, morally at least, with the Saturnalia; it was not only a vast "spree," but, like the Saturnalia, a temporary relief from the rigidities of social arrangements and a sort of social safety-valve at the same time. Another festival which used to be kept in England when the writer was a boy, and which had a strong and most pathetic tinge of the Saturnalia, was the festival of the chimney-sweeps on the first of May. Those hapless boys, mostly parish apprentices, and the lowest and most miserable slaves of civilization, had that one privileged day of merriment and feasting in the year. They used to dance on the lawn round "Jack in the Green," clattering their brushes and wooden shovels, after which they were regaled by the charitable with beef and plum pudding. Happily that caste of misery and degradation has now ceased to exist. If the mummers have departed, let us hope the "Waits" have not departed with them. Their music was hardly an equivalent, especially in the rural parishes, for the song of the angelic choir heralding the nativity, which presumably it professed to reproduce. But its sound in the dead of night made a strong impression, half awful, half pleasant, on the ear of childhood.

Sunday and Christmas are now pretty much in the same position as institutions which have lost or are fast losing their old theological basis, but rest securely on a basis of another kind. It is impossible to insist on the obligation of keeping the Jewish Sabbath, the day on which the Creator rested after the six days' work of Creation; and in fact we do not keep it, our Sunday being the first day of the week and not the seventh. But the Sabbath has glided into the Day of Rest, of spiritual rest for those who are spiritually minded, of rest at all events for all, and of Sabbath stillness after the noise and bustle of the week. The French Revolutionists, when they undertook to make new heavens and a new earth on the principles of Reason and Rousseau, substituting the tenth day for the seventh, found it would not do. Sunday has ceased to be an article of the law, but it remains an article of human nature. So it is with Christmas. Christians in the Middle Ages thought that they were keeping the actual birthday of the Saviour, as they thought when they went on a pilgrimage to Jerusalem that they saw the identical spots where the scenes of His Passion had been enacted and the Sepulchre in which He had been laid. We know that the day of Christ's birth is totally uncertain. Clement of Alexandria, a Father of the second century, speaks of those who affected

to assign the day as "over curious," and his confession of ignorance is decisive. All attempts to settle the point by reference to historical landmarks, to ecclesiastical tradition, or to the shepherd's calendar are vain. Probably the time of the winter solstice, the birthday of the year, was fixed on for the nativity of the Sun of Righteousness. The old Latin hymns seem almost to admit as much by coupling the coming of the Saviour with the return of light. Not only the day of Christ's birth but the year is uncertain, and the French Revolutionists had that fact upon their side when, proceeding to regenerate chronology as well as society, they substituted for the Christian era that of the fancied enthronement of Reason. Nevertheless, we let this article of the mediæval calendar stand, and still on the traditional day celebrate the birth of Christianity and of all that Christianity has brought with it to society, to the home, and to the heart. Even those who in this critical and sceptical age have ceased to be Christians in name may celebrate the festival of humanity. For they can hardly deny that it was with Christianity that the sense of a common humanity and of the brotherhood of man with all its duties and charities, and with the civilization which is grounded on it, came into the world. A Greek philosopher might point out the close fellowship which united mankind; but

that same philosopher pronounced slavery an ordinance of nature, and when he spoke of mankind probably thought only of the free. That there were no hospitals or alms-houses before Christ may not be strictly true; but it is certain that there was nothing in ancient civilization like the vast system of Christian charities. The Comtist religion of Humanity, though it presents itself as a new creation, is, as has been often and truly said, Roman Catholic Christianity reproduced, with a new set of saints, sacraments, and festivals. Those who cannot keep Christmas Day as the holiday of a revealed religion, may keep it as the holiday and the annual renewal of human brotherhood, social beneficence, and family affection.

Suppose some vestiges and relics of heathenism do mingle with our mode of keeping the Christian feast; suppose the Yule log does represent the sacred fire of pagan superstition, and remind us of the scene in a Scandinavian hall, where our rugged progenitors quaffed their mead and sang their rude drinking songs amidst the trophies of wild tribal war. Suppose the mistletoe is the mystical plant of the Druid, though it is difficult to see how the connection can be traced between Druidism and kissing. All this only widens the circle of historic association and makes the festival in a larger sense human. Even the most orthodox among us have by this time

pretty well discarded the narrow theology, uncountenanced by any rational construction of the Gospel, which puts the heathen out of the pale of salvation and consigns them to the power of evil for not having heard a word which was never preached to them or believed miraculous events which had not then taken place. We recognize the debt which Christian Ethics owe to Socrates, Plato, Marcus Aurelius, and Epictetus. We scout the monkish morality which consigns virtuous pagans, with one or two arbitrary exceptions, to eternal torments. We have enlarged the bounds of Christendom to the full compass of the designation "Son of Man."

It is in vain that the Puritan has tried to dislodge the Papistical, Prelatical, and heathen Christmas by substituting for it Thanksgiving Day. His failure is almost as signal as that of the Jacobins in their attempt to substitute the birthday of their Republic for the birthday of Christendom. A holiday of any kind is always popular, and it is very meet and right that we should express pious gratitude for the ingathering of the harvest. But who, except the heirs of the Puritans, cares very much about Thanksgiving Day? With what tender and hallowed associations is its name encircled? Who particularly wishes on that day to gather all whom he loves around him, or calls up with special fondness the image of those whom he has lost? To

see a man eating his Christmas dinner alone at a club makes one shudder. Would the sight of a man eating his Thanksgiving dinner alone give one the same shock? Perhaps one who is not a New Englander or a Puritan underrates the intensity of New England and Puritan feeling. But Mrs. Beecher Stowe is a New Englander, and she shows us in her *Pogonuc* how, when the burst of anti-Anglican feeling connected with the Revolution was over, Christmas, with its little Church pageantries and its genial memories, stole back to its place in the hearts of all but the most austere Puritanical portion of the people. The children even of the Puritan minister cannot keep away. One thing is certain, Thanksgiving can never, like Christmas, be a feast of mankind or of Christendom, since the time of harvest will always differ in different parts of the world. Christmas, it is true, we are apt to associate with winter, with snow, and with the storms which, raging out-of-doors, endear by contrast the bright fire and the happy circle within. But it may be kept, and is kept, at once in England, in America, in Australia, and in Hindostan. If the supporters of Thanksgiving Day fling any stones at Christmas on account of its association with a sacred season of the heathen, the stones may be flung back; for nothing is more certain than that the heathen were in the habit of offering the first-fruits to their gods.

Let me say, however, that there have been two occasions on which I have myself been made to feel as warmly as any New Englander about Thanksgiving. Both were in the time of the Civil War. Just when the fury of the war was at its height, and the North was intensely embittered by the reports of the cruel treatment of its captive soldiers at Andersonville, I visited the Prison Hospital at Baltimore, in which a number of Confederate prisoners, convalescent as well as sick, were confined. It happened to be Thanksgiving Day, and looking into the dining hall I saw the tables plentifully laid out with turkey and all the other good things of the season, which had been sent in by the kind-hearted enemies of the prisoners. The incident was the more striking because nowhere was the rage of parties so fierce as in the border city of Baltimore. The other occasion was a Thanksgiving dinner party in New England when, though the quarrel with England about the *Alabama* was going on, and our host was a fervent patriot, and had lost relatives in the war, he gave as a toast after dinner, "The President of the United States and the Queen of England."

The native of old England, at all events, wherever he may find himself, at the Pole or in the Tropics, beneath the roof of home, on the wide sea, or in the tented field, tries in some way to honour

the season and its associations. A kinsman of the writer, an officer of the army that entered France after Waterloo, undertook on Christmas Day to make a plum pudding for the Mess. He knew the ingredients, but forgot that they swelled in boiling. So he tied the cloth tight, and the Mess was presented with a Christmas Pudding of the size and consistency of a cannon ball.

The custom of giving presents at Christmas and the New Year certainly cannot be acquitted of heathen associations: it is too clear that *étrennes* is derived from *strenæ*. An ancient ecclesiastical writer consequently denounces the custom as "diabolical," the religion of the heathen and everything pertaining to it being supposed to be the direct work of the Devil. The youthful recipients of the *strenæ* will be inclined to retort the malediction. In ancient times, as in modern, the gifts were accompanied with good wishes for the coming year. The practice is too natural to call for any learned explanation. With us it has been developed into a round of visits on New Year's Day, of the formality of which society seems to be growing a little weary, so that the custom is likely to fall into disuse. We shall have reason to be sorry for its departure if it has served, as I have heard people say that it has, to terminate, without the awkwardness of a formal reconciliation, any misunderstanding or coolness that

may have arisen during the past year. The end of the old year, coming with the birthday of the religion of charity, is a good time for writing off from the ledger of the memory all the evil debts of unkindness, and opening a new book of mutual goodwill.

Nowhere is the spirit of Christmas, as it now is, of Christmas as a feast of goodwill and affection, apart from anything ecclesiastical, better embodied than in Dickens' *Christmas Carol*. Though on a small scale, the *Christmas Carol* is perhaps the most perfect work of Dickens' genius. To say that it ought to be read in churches would be profane; but much is read in churches that is not so good and certainly far less effective. By the social geniality of his writings, the author of the *Christmas Carol* and the creator of such characters as the "Brothers Cheeryble" has done more than sermons and dissertations to save the heart of society from being poisoned by social regenerators who philanthropically preach class hatred, and all the purveyors of malignity with whose venom the world abounds; and while we laugh or cry over his novels, we hardly recognize the debt which we owe him on this account. The description in *Pickwick* of the keeping of Christmas Day at Mr. Wardle's, though full of fun, is not in quite so wholesome a strain as the *Carol*. There is too much whiskey in it; as

indeed there is generally in the writings of Dickens, who was in a perpetual state of revolt against the rule of hypocritical fanaticism which he has pilloried in Stiggins, and sometimes gives his enemy the advantage by running into excess. We may feast and be merry without excess. Christ himself opens His mission and performs His first miracle at a marriage feast. Great changes appear to be impending, and the day may come, as the Comtists think, when man will be so refined and intellectual that he will regard taking food as an ignominious necessity of his material nature, and will retire to eat in secret. But so long as the glow of physical enjoyment retains its connection with the glow of feeling, the least sensual of all physical delights will be our Christmas dinner, and the Prohibitionist must be stern indeed who will forbid us to drink the health of all friends, present or abroad, on Christmas Day.

