

The Christmas Carol



THE twenty-fifth of December, rather the week about that time has been celebrated for many ages with rejoicing. Long before the Christian era the pagan astronomers decided that these were the shortest days before the sun returned to northern lands to bring another spring and seed time and harvest. The dreary winter was at its worst, and the coming days would have longer hours of light and sunshine and the reawakening of nature. Therefore sing and be joyful. The Egyptians held a festival in honor of the birth of their god Horus. The Romans called it "the birthday of the invincible sun," and dedicated it to Bacchus, rejoicing with him that the sun was about to return and revivify the vineyards. The Persians held a festival of uncommen splendor as the birthday of Mithras, the mediator, a spirit of the sun. In the north country among the worshippers of Odin it was a nature festival of riotous feasting, because the fast of winter was approaching its end. It has been a time of universal celebration according to ancient written history since the beginning, and obscure tribes in remote nations have legends of their own about what we call Christmas—the feast of peace and good will.

As Christianity brought its blessings to follow the good of past religions, it seems only right that the birth of Christ should come at a time of general rejoicing. It made it easier for the pagans to turn to the Saviour of Light, at a time when the returning sunshine in the skies was symbolical of the feeling of brotherly kindness which was taught in the love of a little child. And so early as the second century the church celebrated Christmas day when the heathen were honoring their gods.

The Christmas celebration, as we know it, is but a reincarnation of the Yuletide of the Anglo Saxon tribes. Singing is a proper way to manifest joy. It delights the singer and gives pleasure to others. The churchly carols were not enough for the hearty feeling. The pagan feasting remains. And so with that divine old carol, "Adeste Fideles," are convivial songs.

Come hither, ye faithful;
Triumphantly sing;
Come, see the manger,
Our Saviour and King!
To Bethlehem hasten,
With joyous accord!
Oh, come ye, come hither,
To worship the Lord!

The contrast lies in "A Carole Brynging in Ye Bore's Heed"

Capri apri dero,
Reddens laudes domino.
The Bore's head in hand bring I,
With garlands gay and rosemary;
And I pray you all sing meryly,
Quis castis in convivio.

The church of the early days had some of the wisdom of modern social service. It entertained its parishioners in a worldly way as well as in instilled religious doctrine. The mystery, miracle plays and mummeries enacted under the direction of the clergy rehearsed the scene in the stable. These plays gave rise to a number of legendary carols. The "Cherry Tree Carol" was popular in London in the last century. It related the story of the Virgin begging Joseph to pluck some cherries for her, and when he refusing, the unborn babe speaks and tells his mother to reach out her hand and the tree will bow before her, and the carol goes on to say:

"Then bespake Joseph,
I have done Mary wrong," etc.
Another carol of this time is full of beautiful imagery.
"As Joseph was a-walking,
He heard an angel sing—
The night shall be born,
Our heavenly king;
He neither shall be born
In house nor in hall,
Nor in the place of Paradise,
But in an ox's stall," etc.
This is in the same spirit as our familiar:
"While shepherds watched their flocks
By night
All seated on the ground,
The angel of the Lord came down
And glory shone around."

"Fear not," said he (for mighty dread
Had seized their troubled mind);
"Glad tidings of great joy I bring
To you and all mankind."

And who would forget the swing of melody, and the charity taught in "Good King Wenceslaus looked forth On the least of Stephen."

He saw the beggar gathering fuel in the snow that lay "round about," and calls to his servants to bring him robes and wine and to fetch the poor man in from the cold.

In the rural districts the nature festival lived long after the church had taken the feast. There were remains of tree worship and sacrifice to Pomona in Cornwall as late as 150 years ago. The peasants used to go into the orchards on Christmas day with pailfuls of cider and roasted apples. The health of the trees was drunk to song, and libations poured upon the roots. In various sections of northern Europe it is the custom to decorate trees out of doors. The fir trees as evergreens, and fruit trees for their promises, were trimmed with long streamers of ribbon or paper.

The Christmas tree finds its ancestor in the German ash Ygdrasil, a great tree whose top reached to Walhalla, the home of the gods, and whose roots were fast in the earth.

The Germans have a wealth of carols, but nearly all are of a religious nature.

"Oh, Tannenbaum! Oh, Tannenbaum," or the song of the fir tree at Christmas time, has become world wide. Who could count the households that gather around the tapers lighted and the tree loaded with gifts to sing this in unison.

In the English household the song is:

"Gather around the Christmas tree,
Ever green has its branches been
It is king of all the woodland scene."

Or it may be:
"Carol, brothers, carol,
Carol joyfully,
Carol for the coming of Christ's nativity."

The good old custom of singing from house to house on Christmas eve has crept across the water from England to America. It was a part of the program of the season to learn these carols and to gather in bands, going from house to house across the snow and singing before the doors. The neighbors knew they were coming, preparing cakes and warm drinks, and sometimes gifts of money. Whoever has heard "God rest ye, merry gentlemen, let nothing ye dismay," sung heartily in the frosty air has a thrill and an experience that returns to him every Christmas after.

And every Christmas morn is awakened with the stirring strains of "Shout the glad tidings exultingly sing."

But we must not think that England or Germany sing all the carol music. France had a quaint literature of its own. Here is one of Nowell, or Noel, and from north to south there are delightful variations of it:

"Nowell, nowell, nowell, nowell,
This is the salutacyon of the angell
Gabryell,

Tydings true ther be cum neu sent
freme the trynyte,
Be gabryell to nazareth cety of gallie.
A clene maydyn and pure virgyn
thorow her humyltye,
Hath conceybyd the person secund in dete."

Pere Noel comes down the chimney and gives gifts just as Father Christmas does across the channel, and the little French children sing:
"Noel, Noel, Noel, Noel singeth clear,
Holpen are all folk on earth
Born is God's son so dear."
L. M. McCauley.

A Christmas Prayer

GOD, our Father, the shining stars of the cold December sky remind us again of the patient mother and the rock-hewn manger in lowly Bethlehem where lay cradled Thy Eove for the world. In the shadows of the silent stall we stand beside the Child and praise Thee for Thy best great gift to sinful men. Speak to our souls as we wait. Let the sweet, loving, trusting spirit of the Child steal into our lives until it calms all weak and anxious fears and soothes all bitterness and pain. In willing surrender and holy longing let us take the Christ Child into our hearts, that henceforth we may live as He lived, love as He loved, and follow in His footsteps, bringing help to the needy, courage to the weak, comfort to the sorrowing, hope to the downcast, and strength and love to all. Grant that the spirit of loving kindness may so prevail among us and among all people that these who know Thee not, shall be gathered into Thy fold and kingdom.

"OF SUCH IS THE KINGDOM OF HEAVEN"



Crown the Christ Child King

At Christmas time we celebrate the birthday of our King. The wise men came from the far east, attracted by the light of the star, to find and worship the King. This blessed day is lighted by a star that ought to attract our attention and lead us in the same direction and to the same end. This time of music and glad festivities should lay especial emphasis on the kinship of Jesus of Nazareth. It is our privilege to see, in the Babe of Bethlehem, the King of kings and Lord of lords. That vision should be more clear to us than to the wise men of old. They had none of the helps that quicken our eyesight. We may remember the life He lived, the work He did, the sacrifice He made, and the influence He has exerted and is exerting to this very hour.

"Never man spake like this man," concerning God, man, sin, life, death, truth, immortality, and "the vast forever." He has drawn the intellect of the world to himself.

His ideals have inspired civilizations and turned the currents of history into new channels. He has compelled the world to accept his ideas of greatness and the value of human life. He has drawn the art of the world to himself, for the greatest paintings of the ages reflect his glory. He has drawn the music of the world to himself, for the mighty masterpieces of this realm tell the story of his work and influence. He has drawn the thought of the world to himself, for there never was one about whom so many books have been written. His life and words have been the inspiration of the modern altruism that is doing so much to lift humanity to higher and better levels. He is rapidly drawing the heart of the world to himself — is drawing the lives of men to himself.

He shall reign, "King of kings and Lord of lords." Because he humbled himself and made himself of no reputation, and took on him the form of a servant, and became obedient unto death, even the death of the cross, therefore God hath highly exalted him and given him a name that is above every name. If we will not crown him Lord of all in our hearts here, we shall yet be called upon to crown him King of eternity. Let us crown the Christ Child our King in the here and now.

Keeping Christmas Joy

Christmas is a day of joy, but joy should not be allowed to die out of our lives next morning. It should stay with us ever after. We should sing the Christmas songs all the new year. We should carry the peace of God in our hearts continually hereafter. We should learn from this time to find the beauty and the good will in all things, and to show the world that we believe what we say we believe—that since God loves us, and Jesus Christ is our friend, "all's well with the world." They who receive and tell of God's unspeakable gift of Christ as a Redeemer may carry the gladdest sort of Christmas around with them all the year in their hearts.

Our early days will not, indeed, come back; yet in Christmas an Indian summer evening to the venerable—a reviving reminiscence of youth.

THE PRINCE OF PEACE

By JAMES RUSSELL LOWELL

"What means this glory round our feet,"
The Magi mused, "more bright than morn?"
And voices chanted clear and sweet,
"Today the Prince of Peace is born."

"What means that star," the shepherds said,
That brightens through the rocky glen?"
And angels, answering overhead,
Sang, "Peace on earth, good-will to men."

And they who do their souls no wrong,
But keep at eve the faith of morn,
Shall daily hear the angel's song,
"Today the Prince of Peace is born!"

The Way

"When they saw the star they rejoiced with exceeding great joy."
For men in banked cabins in the arctic snows and men in the wind beaten ships on remote seas, for men in tropic jungles and men in forgotten wastes, this day is Christmas. We who spend the day in the friendly security of cities and draw about us the familiar intimacies of home and daily friendships are apt to forget the wonder of this, and the significance. But whether they realize it or not, men draw together during these hours. And this is to follow the star the wise men saw over Bethlehem.

Christmas for most of us is given to the closest of ties and the spirit of it is only a warmer glow of well used affections. But the deepest and mightiest things are the nearest, and in the heart of this day is the hope of the race. Two thousand years ago there was one who spoke from a mountain. His message was the brotherhood of all men. Another time he said: "I am the way, the truth, and the life." Today men follow the way though they do not know, and obey the truth though they do not see, and live the life though they are unconscious of its pulse beat through the world. For the way is the way of the race marching painfully to its far goal.

The life of the individual and the lives of nations are borne upon the bosom of a great tide. Wise men call it by different names, but no man lives effectually save in its full current. Whether we state it in terms of religion, or of philosophy, or policy, its law is but the divine platitude of the brotherhood of man.

The wise man begs to express much more than proverbial wishes that his entire clientele may enjoy the merriment of merry Christmases.

The Swaddling Clothes of the Infant Jesus

ONE of the most famous cathedrals in Germany possesses as its most sacred relic the swaddling clothes of the Infant Jesus. It is a sweet and beautiful possession which many visitors come from afar to venerate.

One Christmas eve the sacristan was arranging the treasure confided to his care, which was to be exposed to view on the great fete of the morrow. The sacristan was a little, hump-backed man, bandy-legged and red-nosed, and it was to this ugly person that the privilege was reserved of always caring for the adored relic. We must not be astonished at this, but must reflect that often the most humble and unattractive are chosen to be nearer the kingdom of heaven. But, unfortunately, the hump-backed sacristan had no idea that he was one of the elect, and the marvelous character of his task gave him no extraordinary emotion. During the 20 years that he had snuffed the candles of the cathedral, and been in daily contact with the treasure, he had received no enlightenment; he never made the sign of the cross before touching the sacred linen, and he treated it with the same mechanical indifference with which he had hammered the soles of the boots in his former occupation of cobbler.

This day, on opening the cupboard in which the linen of the Infant Jesus was carefully enclosed, he whistled a little dance tune and thought: "Ugh! It's not nice weather outside."

A violent wind was blowing in the town, unhooking the signboards of the shops, and making the chimneys shake on all the pointed roofs.

The man, on entering the sacristy, listened to the moaning of the wind, and thought that the fury of nature did not accord well with the fete for which he was preparing; but doubtless there was a striking symbol in the storm, and the unloosed elements might calm themselves suddenly when the words of pardon and pity were said: "On earth peace, good will toward men."

The sacristan went to put his coarse hand carelessly on the Divine relic, when an unheard-of event happened. The window in the sacristy opened suddenly, pushed by a great rush of wind. The storm entered like an invasion of the Barbarians; it rushed over all in the room, knocking down the sacred objects, and the linen of the Infant Jesus, taken up in the whirling tempest, was blown out of the window. The hump-back remained for a moment stupid and stricken, then recovering himself, he rushed into the church, crying:

"Saint Joseph! Saint Martin! Help! Help! They have taken the linen!"

At this alarming cry the people ran from all parts. The priests in their suplices, the beadle in his cap, the Swiss with his halberd, the old women who had been praying, ran with pale faces and terrified eyes, and everyone cried out:

"What are you saying? Holy Mother! what are you saying?"

The little hump-back tore to the door; he seemed stricken with madness.

"The linen!—what misery!—the linen! By the window! A puff of wind! Run quickly to catch it again!"

Then in the road was sudden tumult! everyone began to run in pursuit of the stolen relic.

The noses turned up to the houses resembled notes of interrogation.

"There! there!" said some one.

"No, no!"

They discovered it at last. It was lying close to a crest high up on the roof of the church. One would have said that the fretwork column, chilled with cold, had taken refuge in the sheltering folds.

"There it is! there it is!" Everyone cried out together. But how were they to reach it?

"It's the sacristan's duty to go up; it was he who let it go." The hump-back whistled no longer.

Suddenly a courageous man came forward. He crawled up the columns, he hooked himself to the fretwork, he hung from the projections; after a thousand perils he arrived at the place, and extended his arm to take the linen. But—at this moment, the linen unfurled itself and was blown to a neighboring roof.

People rushed to catch it; it waited until the hands were quite close, then it flew off to the other side of the street.

Now began an extraordinary race. From street to street, from roof to roof, the Divine swaddling clothes flew, pursued by the crowd.

What a chase! The priests, red with indignation, stifling their arms, crying orders, and gesticulating madly. The Swiss followed with his useless halberd. The little hump-backed sacristan ran also as fast as his bandy legs would go. And behind came the old women, limping, pitying themselves, and invoking the name of Mary.

The whole town was rapidly raised by this great agitation. To the madmen priests and the old devotees was joined a population running and excited. Some brought poles, others brought ladders, and some brought crucifixes, or sprigs of blessed box-tree, with which they thought they could seize the linen, attracted by this holy magnet.

The firemen soon arrived, increas-



ing the disorder of the strident noise with their horns and the galloping of their horses.

But the swaddling-clothes seemed to mock the priests and their exorcisms, the devout with their crucifixes, the firemen with their ladders.

Sometimes the linen placed itself at the edge of a cornice and rolled itself round a chimney. From up there an end of the stuff floated ironically near the crowd, seeming to scoff at it. And when, with difficulty, some one gained the roof, hoping to have caught it—good-by! it would go further yet, without any respect of person.

After an hour of this game, it suddenly went away, and all the crowd could see was a point of white disappearing on the horizon.

In a distant road, bright at the end of the town, in a sordid attic, a woman was holding a new-born child on her knees. She was contemplating it with a somber tenderness. She covered it with kisses, having no her garment to give it than her sad lips.

By the gaping window, with cracked framework and broken panes, the cold and the wind came to usher in a Christmas of misery. The newly-born was rigid and white, like a waxen Jesus.

My God! my God! had he to die thus, the innocent—had he lived only to suffer for an hour? The mother got up and moved about the room, silently, fiercely. Nothing—she could find nothing to protect the little body in all its purity.

She sat down again; she did not weep; tears are a luxury—even her eyes were parched.

Near her there was nothing but wind and cold; they entered, making a clamor like many wooden shoes. They pressed close, with their lugubrious and cold faces—bad magicians come to bring to the newly-born their gifts of agony.

Christmas! Christmas! Ah! that Other that one commiserates, that Child of Bethlehem. He at least had straw in his cradle, and the beasts around warmed him with their breath!

The mother, who could not cry, clenched her fist to curse Christmas.

But her hand fell in the presence of the adorable miracle.

At the gaping window something white floated. It arrived from nothingness. It was like a bird which had come to ask for refuge.

Then softly, the white thing came into the attic. The mother stared. The swaddling-clothes!

And the little naked newly-born was wrapped in the linen of the little Infant Jesus.

Bring the "Star" to Someone

He for whom Christmas is named brought the gift of himself to a world which had nothing—except faith and love—to give him in return, and which for the most part has not so far been disposed to give him even that. Nevertheless, he gave it, and there is no genuinely vital Christmas giving which is not in the same spirit. We would not for the world discourage the interchange of gifts which come to be customary at this time in families and between friends, where such interchange is prompted by the heart. In spite of the shame and the hypocrisy which have come to overlay much of such giving, the custom tends to the development of the higher qualities. But this is a reminder that the pleasure of the getting ready for Christmas always great where sincere impulse is made the guide among the shops, can be immensely heightened by a getting ready to make happy some dependent soul which now looks forward to no brightness in the day.

To All the People

He does not simply say, Christ is born, but to you he is born; neither does he say, I bring glad tidings, but to you I bring glad tidings of great joy. Furthermore, this joy was not to remain in Christ, but it shall be to all the people.—Martin Luther.