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CHRISTMAS AS A TOKEN OF ✝ ✝ ✝ ✝ THE TRIUMPH OF CHRISTIANITY.

"CHRISTMAS"—every one should know the meaning of the word, yet how few ever think of it. Christmas, "the mass of Christ"—how often, one might ask, is the day thought of as primarily one for the religious celebration of the anniversary of the Saviour's birth?

It cannot be said that the religious significance of the day has been neglected; only in modern times is a new method has come about for celebrating it. Traditions that jealous guardians of the past, has kept careful watch over the day. In fact, Christmas day now is such a sweet confusion of conflicting traditions and historical associations that it is hard to distinguish the pagan from the Christian in the original sources of those forms and festivities and beliefs that attach to the 25th of December as it is celebrated today.

For people, when they behold the feasting and gormandizing and merriment of this season, are aware that a good many of the frolics and social customs of this holiday time are almost wholly derived from pagan or Bacchic institutions, essentially Christian as the spirit of modern Christmastide may be.

Just at this season of the year the Romans had their saturnalia, which were holidays devoted to boisterous merriment in honor of the mythical king Saturn, who was later deified. Saturn was supposed to have ruled over the golden age, that time looked back upon by the Romans as a period of unmixed peace and happiness.

These games and rituals of the saturnalia took place every year, beginning on the 17th of December and lasting at first three and then later seven days, which would, of course, carry them through to that evening which is our Christmas eve.

During the saturnalia there was not any general pollutation, but, it must be confessed, a great deal of wine was consumed by the Roman populace, and much of the merrymaking descended to riotery. All the usual order of things was upset. Slaves sat at table with their masters, mentals were allowed to make jests with or at their superiors, and it was a rule that the wealthy and lighbors should wait upon their servants. No one was supposed to take the most outrageous conduct seriously, and no one lost his temper or whatever the joke or jest might be. Wine, and song and laughter ruled the empire on those days of primitive merrymaking, for it was, in short, an era of good feeling among all people. Just as Christmas was, in a more refined sense, is among ourselves. What is still more remarkable was that little clay images, or, in other words, dolls, and even toys were presented by Roman parents to their children. During saturnalia week nobody was so foolish as to work, preparations being made weeks beforehand for the lengthened festivities.

Historians have been able to trace without much difficulty this December celebration of the Romans back to the feast of the Greeks, where, in fact, the Romans seem to have got all that was best in their civilization. In truth it goes back to still older peoples, and there is no means of ascertaining today just how early in the childhood of the world the traditions embodied in our annual merrymaking first originated. Even as far back as our knowledge goes both the Celts and the Teutons honored the same season as did the Romans and with much the same festivities. It is generally accepted that the reason for this may be attributed to the time of the winter solstice occurring just when it did, when all nomad and ill housed people were ready to rejoice at the return of the sun and the lengthening of the days once more. It stood for the beginning of the renewal of life and activity in all things of nature and the return of more comfortable days when less danger of long frosts and frost nipped knees among the frozen hills of long ago provided ample reason for thanksgiving and merrymaking.

Up to the fourth century the eastern church recognized the 6th day of January, long known as "Little Christmas," as the time for celebrating both the birth and the baptism of the Christ Child. The great majority of the civilized world, however, has long since unquestionably accepted the 25th as the date, as established by the Roman church, as the day of the Saviour's birth. Since this has been done a skeptical historian or two has attempted to show that the popular belief in this date, but through all the changing centuries man has not allowed the day to change, and it will be a bold iconoclast indeed who would today attempt to take away from the world its firm belief in the accuracy of Christmas day.

It is well known that in Palestine from the middle of December to the middle of February there is a comparatively dry season between the early and the later winter rains, and during this season it was the custom for shepherds to watch their flocks on the plains of Bethlehem. Those shepherds it must have been who, 18 centuries ago, saw the new star in the east.

While the church, after the birth of a holy and beneficent plant, as in fact the universal name today of "all heal" still shows, and it was customary to distribute it among the people as something which would guard and protect them during the following 12 months before the next ceremony took place.

But when Christianity became the church recognized the 6th day of January, long known as "Little Christmas," as the time for celebrating both the birth and the baptism of the Christ Child. The great majority of the civilized world, however, has long since unquestionably accepted the 25th as the date, as established by the Roman church, as the day of the Saviour's birth. Since this has been done a skeptical historian or two has attempted to show that the popular belief in this date, but through all the changing centuries man has not allowed the day to change, and it will be a bold iconoclast indeed who would today attempt to take away from the world its firm belief in the accuracy of Christmas day.

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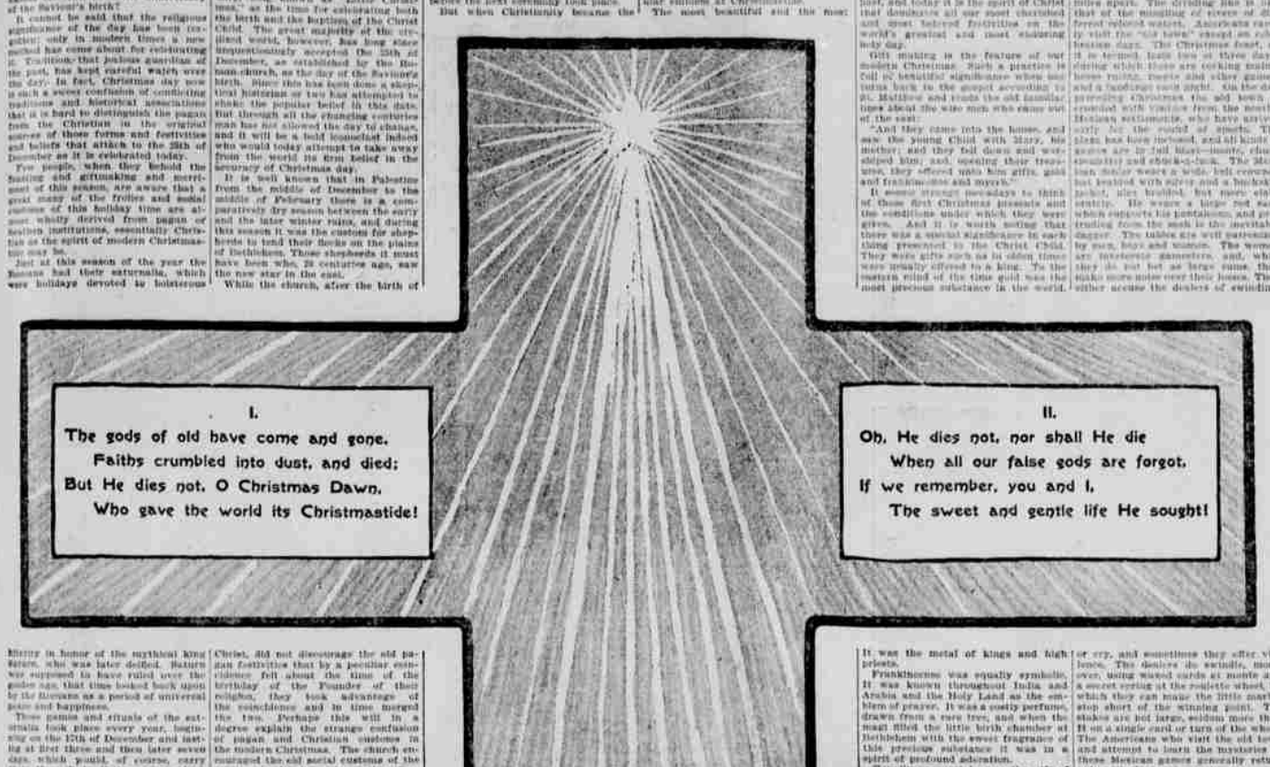

Christ, did not discourage the old pagan festivities that by a peculiar coincidence fell about the time of the birthday of the Founder of their religion, they took advantage of the coincidence and in time merged the two. Perhaps this will in a degree explain the strange confusion of pagan and Christian customs in the modern Christmas. The church encouraged the pagan observances of the season, simply giving them a turn in a new direction and introducing little by little the religious idea.

Some of the results of this strange combination, especially during the middle ages, were very curious and puzzling. For instance, just as, during the Roman saturnalia, servants were permitted to assume for a brief period authority over their masters, it became the custom in England, following out the same idea, to allow the populace "Innocents' day—Dec. 28—to take possession of the churches and enact most curious mummeries therein. The world should be thankful for the birth of this custom, for it was out of these ludicrous burlesques and miracle plays that the modern English drama has evolved. The ever popular Punch and Judy still plays some idea of what these mediaval performances were like, though the modern spectator who witnesses a performance of Shakespeare's "Hamlet" would never realize that such a creation was a lineal descendant of Punch and his carnulous wife. Sure, however, is the truth.

It was also a mediaval custom in England to establish at Yuletide a "lord of misrule," appointed to conduct the revels in castle or country house or at court. Every one was expected to pay a sort of mock homage to this merry monarch of misconduct. This, too, was not without its similarity to the Saturnalia of the Roman saturnalia, when, for the time being, the servant became the master and the plebeian the monarch.

It is interesting to trace back the custom of decorating houses with greens at Christmas. Like most of our Christmas customs in America, it was adopted from the English. Even in quite recent times, for instance, mistletoe was carried to the altar of York cathedral on Christmas eve. This mistletoe, as is now well known, was first used by the early Druids, who held the plant as possessing a certain religious significance. The old Druid priests made a great and elaborate ceremony of cutting the mistletoe from the oak trees about the end of the month of each December. They regarded it as a talisman against evil. Hence the custom of hanging it over the door of the house, and the custom of the maidens of the house of kissing the young men who passed under it. Of course, the custom of hanging it over the door of the house, and the custom of the maidens of the house of kissing the young men who passed under it, is now a custom of the Christmas season, and it is a custom of the Christmas season, and it is a custom of the Christmas season, and it is