

THE CHRISTMAS TREE.

"The whole world is a Christmas tree
And the stars its many candles be.
O sing a carol joyfully,
The year's great feast in keeping."

By Letta Eulalia Thomas

Photos by Mrs. Wm. Durrant.

There is magic in the name! The Christmas tree! What visions of merriment, of happy memories, of joyous anticipation, of flowers and song and sweetness, of holly and mistletoe, of light and love, arises at the sound of the words!

Down the dim and dusty path of the ages, gathering the things of beauty and value, treasuring for us all that was best in the lives that have gone, the Angel of Good has come and has brought to us as a part of our inheritance the Christmas Tree. Like many of our Christmas customs, the origin of the Christmas tree is shrouded in mystery. There is a great number of legends and traditions which assume the honor of introducing the custom to many men of many lands, but the wealth of story and song only serves to make it more difficult to discover its true origin.

Through all the ages, trees have been used by men of every faith as symbols of eternal life. It is not difficult to trace many a possible or even probable path by which the Christmas tree may have come, but who can say which is the true one, or whether all the paths have but led to it. Some believe that it may be connected with the great tree "Yggdrasil" of Norse mythology; others that it is a revival of the customs of the Roman Saturnalia, which occurred at the same season as our Christmas. It has been explained as a descendant of the Assyrian "Tree of Great Light"; again as having come from the ancient Egyptian practice of decorating their houses, at the time of the winter solstice, with branches of the date palm, the symbol of life triumphant over death. In support of this theory, attention is called to the fact that pyramids of green paper, wreathed and festooned with flowers and sweetmeats, are often substituted in Germany for Christmas trees; both trees and pyramids symbolizing life, mortal and immortal.

At about this time of the year the Jews celebrated their feast of "Chanukkah" or the feast of lights, also called the Feast of the Dedication. Lighted candles played a prominent part in this feast. It is interesting to note that the German name for Christmas, Weihnachten, means the night of Dedication, and that the Greeks call Christmas the Feast of Lights.

In the Christmas tree, many find an adaptation, to domestic use, of the old time "Jesse-tree" which was formerly often used, in church decoration, both in the windows and as a carved ornament on the blocks of stone. The "Jesse-tree" typified a genealogical tree with its root in Jesse and the

Lord Jesus as its crowning fruit. Among German speaking peoples no Christmas tree is considered complete without the figure of the Mother and her Son affixed to the topmost spire. It is also frequently found that a stable or farmyard has been arranged at the foot of the tree.

Among the legends of the Christmas tree, one of the most beautiful is that of Saint Boniface which has been so exquisitely told that it may be worth while to recall it briefly.

During his apostolic journeys, Saint Boniface was traveling through a forest in the land of the Hessians, and one cold winter night came upon a great company of people, assembled on a hill crowned by a mighty Thunder Oak. From a great fire kindled near the altar, at the foot of the tree, showers of sparks and leaping flames shot upward throwing a weird light over the assembled worshipers, outlined against the dark forest; the white earth, the white-clad warriors, the white-robed High Priest with the hammer uplifted to slay the bound and kneeling child about to be offered as a sacrifice to Thor.

Leaping to the side of the High Priest, Saint Boniface rescued the child by turning the blow aside with the cross. Seizing an axe he began to cut the oak, while the people aghast at such sacrilege looked on in silent horror until the trunk was half cut through. Suddenly, a miraculous storm arose, catching the tree by the top and, breaking it into four pieces, hurled it to the ground.

The Pagans were so impressed, by this evidence of supernatural power, that when the good Saint told the story of Jesus, they were converted to the new faith.

"And here" said the apostle, as his eyes fell on a young fir tree standing straight and green, with its top pointing towards the stars, amid the divided ruins of the fallen oak, "here is the living tree with no stain of blood upon it, that shall be the sign of your new worship. See how it points to the sky. Let us call it the tree of the Christ-child. You shall go no more into the shadows of the forest to keep your feasts with secret rites of shame. You shall keep them at home with laughter and song and rites of love."

While the use of trees has been common to so many religious festivals, the Christmas tree—as we know it—can be historically traced, as a regular feature of Christmas celebration, only to the sixteenth century. For two hundred years, the fashion obtained along the Rhine and then, suddenly, spread over Germany, and fifty years later had taken possession of the Christian world.

Though used occasionally, it was not until the marriage of Queen Victoria to a German prince, that the use of the Christmas tree became general in England. America is also indebted to the German emigrant for its almost universal use.

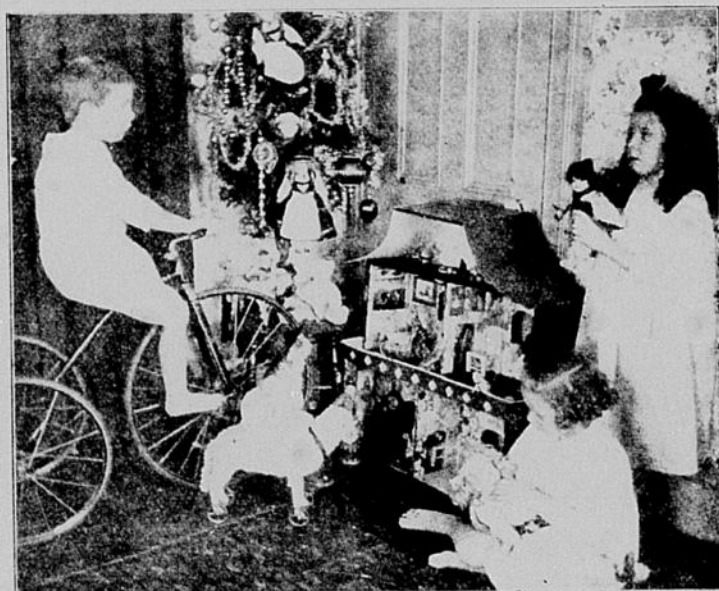
The custom of using evergreens for decorations in religious festivals is a very ancient one. In Nehemiah we read, "They find it written in the law 'Go forth into the mount and fetch olive branches, and pine branches, and myrtle branches and branches of thick trees, and make booths.'"

The fir and the pine, most often used as Christmas trees, have always been among the sacred

trees of the world. "Benigne Branchlet of Pine" was one of the titles of the Blessed Virgin.

The mistletoe and holly, which play such an important part in our Christmas decorations, have many beautiful stories woven about them, and in the folk-lore of our ancestors, they symbolize much that is holy and mysterious.

The holly or holy tree, sometimes called Christ's Thorn, is surely one of nature's own Christmas trees with its scarlet berries flaming like lighted candles. Its history is full of interest. Away back in the days of the celebration of the Roman Saturnalia, its meaning was peace and goodwill,



Christmas Morning

and the people slipped sprays of it into the boxes containing the gifts which they exchanged. The custom was so sweet and so in keeping with the Christmas spirit that it is not strange that the early Christians retained it.

The Christmas spirit of love and forgiveness is most exquisitely expressed in Charles Mackay's poem "Under the Holly Bough."

"Ye who have scorned each other,
Or injured friend or brother,
In the fast-fading year;
Ye who by word or deed,
Have made a kind heart bleed,
Come gather here!
Let sinned against and sinning
Forget their strife's beginning
And join in friendship now;
Be links no longer broken,
Be sweet forgiveness spoken
Under the holly bough."

Nature has her Christmas trees, and many ways of decorating them, one of which is shown in the accompanying illustration. She has even provided the jeweled tapers for its mystic illumination out on the silent, snowy hillside.

Every year the great forests yield many of these—their beautiful children—as a sacrifice to the year's greatest festival. Pure, holy sacrifices are these, pointing us ever upward; breathing wonderful memories of quiet Christmas seasons spent under the sparkling winter sky when the wild winds chanted the Christmas carols, and light from the heavens set the crystal tapers flashing.

From the land of the North they came, year after year, bringing the breath of God's wilderness; bringing to mind a multitude of sacred traditions and legends; bringing their messages of joy, and love, and happiness, to thousands of homes.

Our artist has shown us one of these trees arrayed in festal garlands and bearing on its branches the wonderful fruit that ripens only at Christmas-tide; the fruit that little hands, and sometimes larger ones, are so eager to pluck; the fruit that springs from the seed of love, hidden deep in the human heart and that is, after all, but the reflection of love divine.



A well dressed Tree.