

Christmas Customs that Came Over the Sea



Mistletoe was Gathered by Druid Priestesses

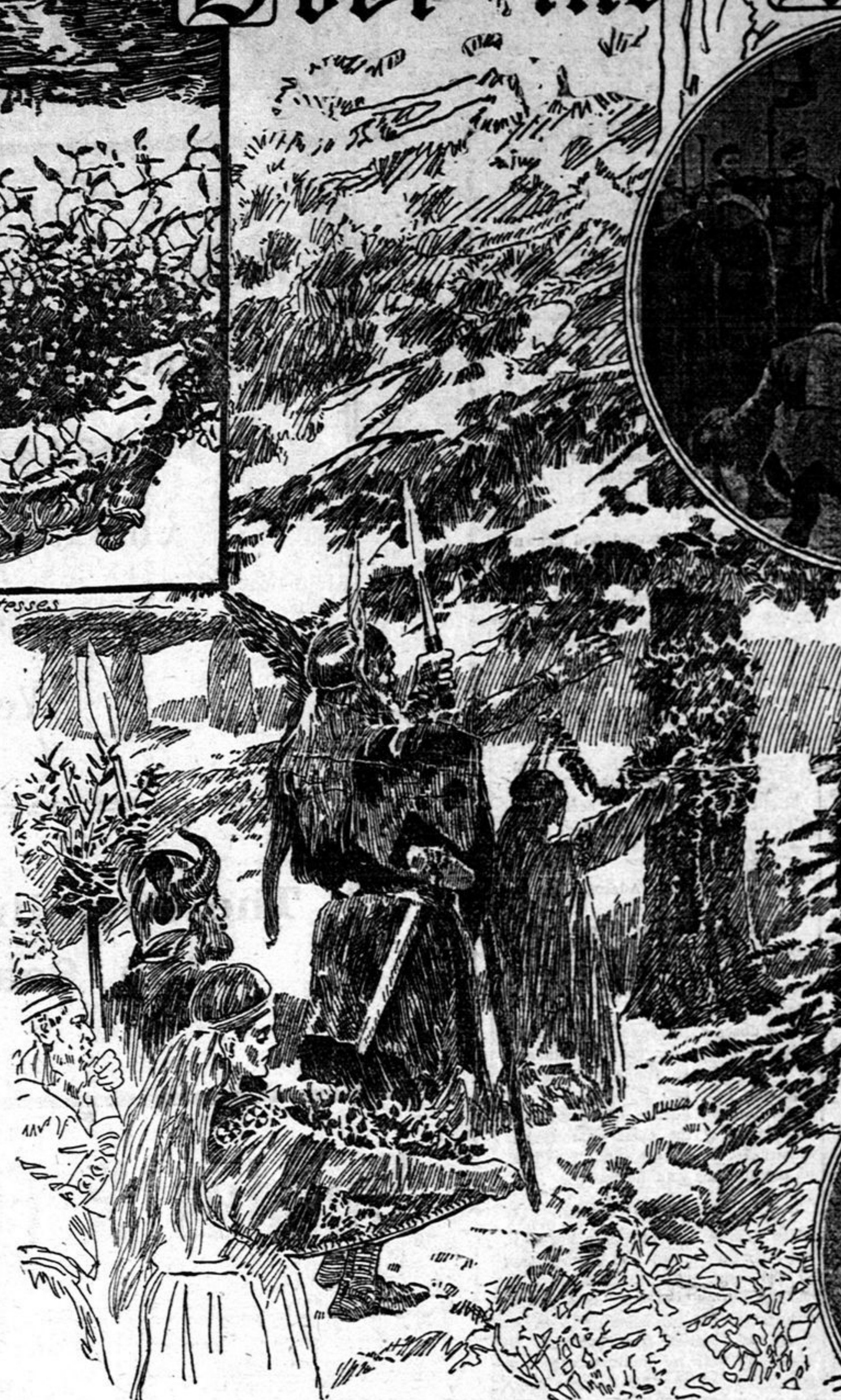
THE best of Christmas—what is it? Goodwill, good cheer, the gifts we give and receive, our enjoyment of children's delight, or our more intimate, selfish sense of utter freedom from the workaday world and our complete relaxation to the happiness of the day that comes but once a year?

We pick and choose, each to his taste; but do not the most discriminating overlook one feature of Christmas which is best of all— which, indeed, is all that underlies the Christmas of feasting and rest and enjoyment, as we observe it?

For it is Christmas, above all other holidays, which, in its divine origin, makes us feel most intimately the kinship of mankind; reminds us most tenderly of the homestead we knew when we were young; perpetuates within us the good cheer and the goodwill of the grandfathers who lived before us; stirs in our living hearts the love that welled high in the bosoms of our forefathers; carries us back to the beginnings of our people, and brings us close—very, very close—to that ancient, strong, kind Mother Earth from which we sprang.

All these Christmas customs we delight in—have they, in themselves, the essence of the high pleasure we draw out of them? Is it not, rather, that we put into them all that we have felt and lived and absorbed of what we accepted from boyhood, as the spirit of hallowed happiness?

Grave or gay, lively or severe, our Christmases live by the genius of the peoples who have made us what we are. Like it much or like it little, and change in the future as we have in the past, our Christmas began in England so very long ago that, for its most popular feature, as well as for one of its newest rites, we must hark back to the time when England was nigh to simple barbarism and the Feast of the Nativity was only a little while come into its own in Rome.



The Christmas Tree of the Druid.

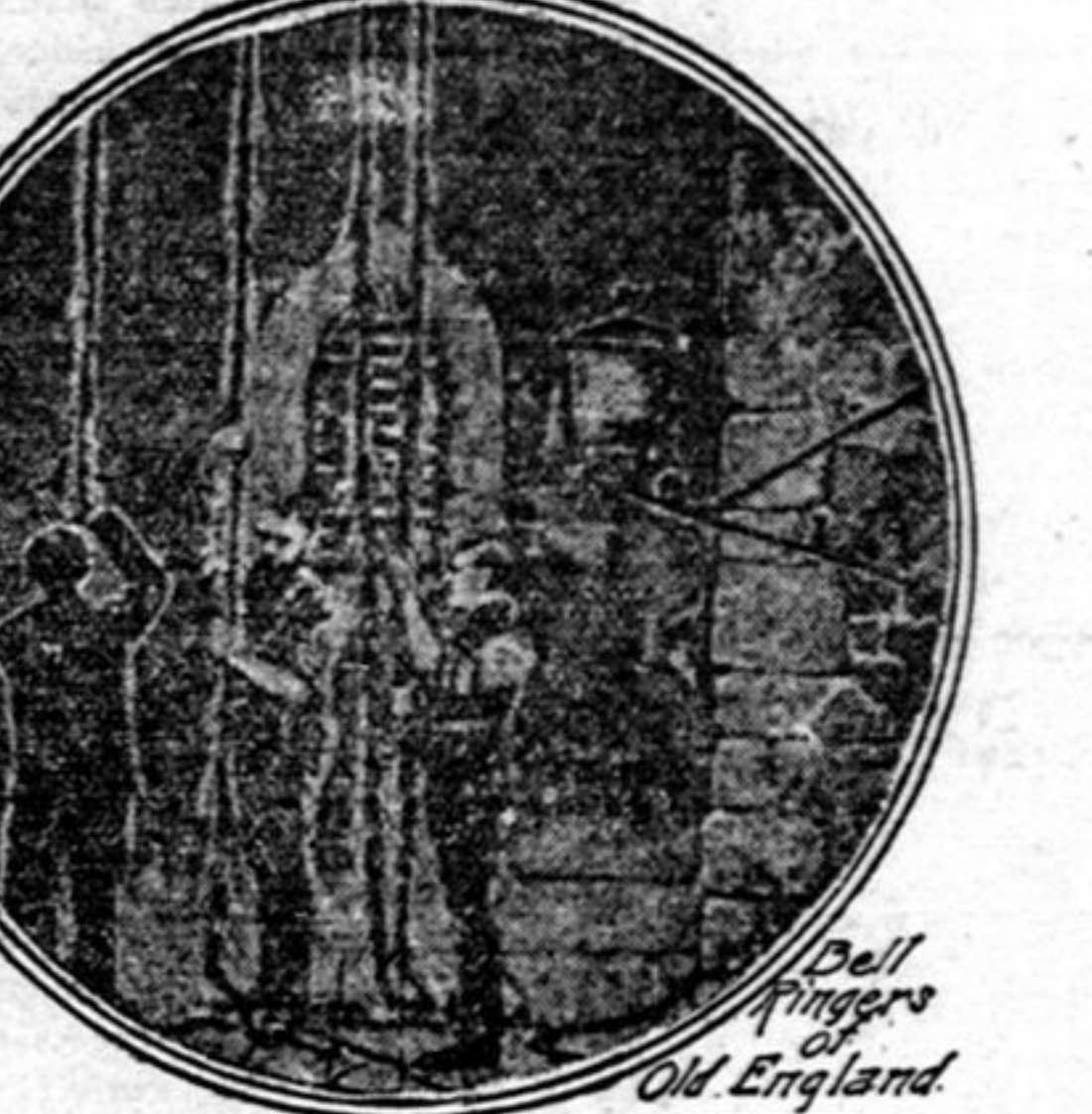
above Minster, witnessed their arrival, made with all the solemn pomp of the ancient church, for Augustine entered Kent bearing a silver cross hung with a banner painted with the figure of the Saviour, while behind him came a long train of choristers, intoning the Kyrie Eleison. Pope Gregory—zealous Christian, yet liberal artist—was apostolic, but not fanatic, and apostolic, too, was the wise Augustine. He carried out his instructions, that he accommodate the Christian worship as much as possible to the customs of the people, with ample tact and a far discretion. The Anglo-Saxons were fond of their feasts, for, what with the mistletoes of their rude living, they fasted often enough. So, when the great Christmas festival of the new faith was instituted, they were permitted to kill and eat their huge oxen, to the glory of God, as they had previously done to the exaltation of the devil.

December's season had been known as "Aerra Geola," because then the sun turned in his glorious course, and the winter solstice was the time of their rejoicing in honor of their ancient deity—Woden, Thor or Saturn, as they variously called him. They went out into the deep groves and paid tribute with grateful vines, and fair Druid maidens bore heaped branches of mistletoe for pious reverence. All-embracing Christianity gathered in the customs with the people; the living tree and the budding twig became part of the Yuletide festival. And the Christian maidens of today, under the Druid mistletoe, have lost nothing by the change, if forlorn Barry Cornwall's hint can be appreciated, just as the children lose nothing because the pine is cut down and the oak allowed to stand in the forest over which it is king. Old as the race itself, probably, and certainly born into the English heart when the first babe was born into the bitter English winter, is the festival fire—the Yule log, laid with more or less ceremony in the wide fireplaces of the American countryside from Maine to

and dyed cast down the axe with all the woods into the chimney; and the axes fete upward; whereof the erie of Fois had great joy, and so haddo all they that were there, and had marvyle of his strength how he alone came up all the stayres with the axe and the woods in his necke." The "erie of Fois" will serve as an excellent type of old English patronage, from which innumerable small observances have come down to us. Everything, after the Norman conquest, which left the conquered people little for themselves, was the bounty of the overlord; and the master of the manor, in later years, was the generous Providence to a great concourse of tenantry, who, if their forefathers had only fought hard enough, would have



Our Great-great-grandmothers were Kissed under the Mistletoe



Bell Ringers Old England

owned for themselves everything he gave to them as his patronage. The negroes' appeal for "Christmas gift," even now made to any prosperous whites they meet in the back country sections of the South, is essentially a heritage of English manor-house Christmas bounty. The practice of many tradespeople—bakers, with their Christmas Dutch cake; grocers with their presents of decorated china—is identified with the custom, cousin to manor hospitality, observed more than a century ago by tradesmen in such an English town as Ripon, where the grocers sent every one on their list a pound or so of raisins and currants for the Christmas pudding, the chandlers sent around large Yule candles and the coopers great billets of wood, called Yule Clogs. The very turkey—dearest of all to us today, for he began to roost up among the distant dollars of certified checks as far back as Thanksgiving—became part of the British Christmas when but few men might slay the Christmas boar; the admirable mince pie, beloved of the young and longed for by the old; the holly boughs—and, oh, yes, of course, the plum pudding—England has cherished them all for uncounted generations. But here, in a nutshell, is a sketch of the typical English Christmas as it was finally evolved, at a time when the young United States still lived the customs from which many of our day descend. It was written a scant century ago:

ANCIENT RITES OF FIRE

"A great, blazing fire, too big, is the visible heart and soul of Christmas. Tastes may differ even on mince pie; but who gainsays a fire?" Is it so? Or is the fire, like all the rest, only an emblem of the festival season—one of the ancient rites which goes back beyond the day when Aethelberht sat out on the chalkdowns above Minster and bade Saint Augustine and his train of monks take their crucified Christ on into Canterbury and dwell there in honor of inheritance, one which belongs to the ancient Druidism only by inheritance, one which was born into England when the first baby shivered in the cold, as the Christ-child shuddered in the grotto of His Nativity? Is there not a better emblem, almost as universal here as it has always been in England, that breathes the very spirit of human gladness, even as it responds to the Christian conception of divine mercy? The Christmas bells, which call on all mankind to rejoice and love one another which stayed the execution of England's duke of Somerset and have made man's sternest justice pitiful, which call the "great joy of the erie of Fois" and his brutal crew over the sufferings of a dumb beast is absorbed to our thought—are not they the true epitome of the sentiment Tenyson voiced?

"Ring out, wild bells, to the wild sky, The flying cloud, the frosty light; The year is going in the night, Ring out, wild bells, and let him die. Ring out the old, ring in the new; Ring, happy bells, across the snow; The year is going, let him go, Ring out the false, ring in the true."

Christmas Superstitions

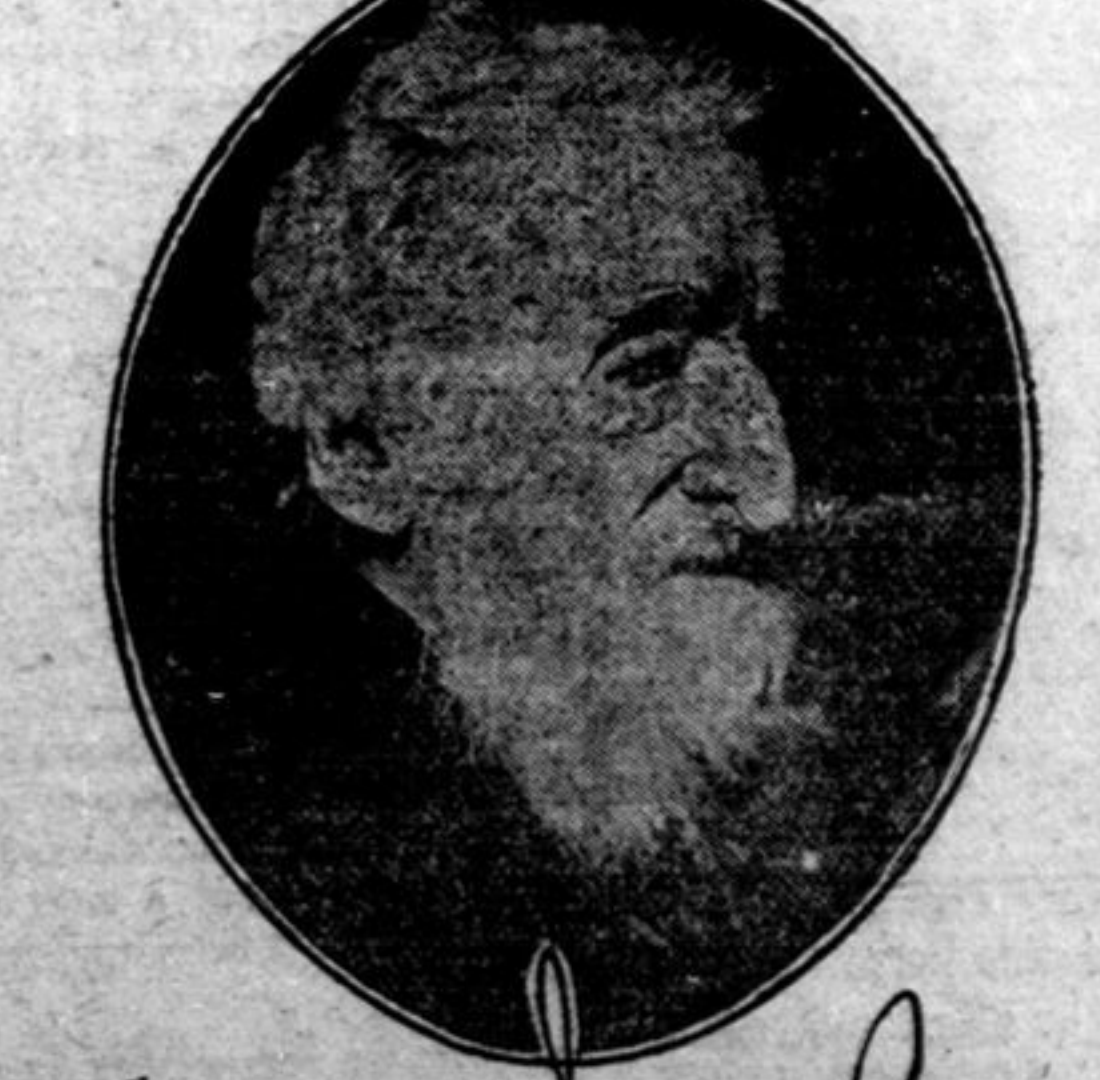
FOR centuries the idea has prevailed that "a green Christmas makes a full graveyard." This is a belief too gruesome for the happy season. Of course, snow, icy landscapes and the chill but exhilarating breezes of winter seem more appropriate at Christmas. We can then gather about the fire, warm our hands, as our hearts should be warmed by the sentiment of the season, and rejoice in the world-wide exchange of good will. The fact is that, in the middle and southern sections of the country, at least, cold Christmas Days are not the rule. When the boy of the family receives a new and gorgeously painted sled from Santa Claus, and the girl glides in her stocking, or nearby, the pair of skates she has been wishing for, nothing short of a blizzard, or blizzard weather, will be satisfactory. Good, clear, cold days of the old-fashioned kind please the elders best, too, notwithstanding the additional demand upon the coalbins. But are cold Christmases the rule? United States weather records run back about the life of a generation. But there are private records extending still further into the past. And these show that cold Christmas Days have not been the rule. We learn, for instance, that Christmas, 1855, was anything but cold, and the mean temperature was 42 degrees below zero, and the mean temperature was the maximum of 57 degrees, and this was but one degree above that of the preceding Christmas. December 25, 1853, thunderstorms occurred in some portions of the South, accompanied by frequent and vivid flashes of lightning. On December 25, 1851, the maximum temperature was 40 degrees, but on the following day the mercury fell, until at night it registered only 9 degrees. Then there came the mild fall of 1855, when the weather was so springlike up to December 25 that rosebuds lingered in the gardens. In some places roses were in bloom on Christmas Day. Two years later Christmas was memorable because of its delightful weather, and it is related in the diaries of that time that the grass in the fields was green and flourishing when New Year's came. Much fine weather was reported in December, 1853—the year of the first national Thanksgiving—but the December of the following year presented very different conditions. "It was a very disagreeable month," states a recorder of facts of the time. "Snow, rain and fog prevailed throughout the month, and walking was of the worst kind. While the mean temperature for Christmas, 1853, was only slightly above the freezing point, the month of December was unusually warm at times. On the last day of the month a pansy was plucked in bloom in the latitude of Pennsylvania. December of 1851 was unusually warm and humid; there was no fall of snow during the month. The cold Christmas Days of recent years were in 1878, when the mercury went as low as 15 degrees in clear weather; in 1884, a partly clear day, when 22 degrees was the minimum; 1887, a clear day, with 27 degrees was the lowest; 1890, cloudy, with 24 degrees minimum; 1892, snowy, with 16 degrees; 1898, clear, and 11 degrees; 1907, clear, and 11 degrees. From these statistics it is very evident that it is not the usual condition for Christmas to be a day of freezing temperatures. After all, it isn't the state of weather that makes a happy Christmas. The enjoyment of the season grows from a contented and charitable heart. Whether the coming Christmas season be one of sunshine or of gloom depends upon those who attune their hearts to its kindly sentiments.

Christmas in the Human Heart..



A Message From General William Booth
Head of the Salvation Army of the World.

CHRISTMAS is largely a time of mutual cooperation for promoting the social happiness of the people. The high ideal is, I fear, largely lost sight of, and I am not disposed to plead for anything different from those who for the remainder of the year do not live in the spirit of the Divine commandments, in humility and sacrifice. When it is celebrated, Christmas supplies the most potent illustration of what may be accomplished for the betterment of the people. Oh! if all the families, towns, cities, corporations could be brought into one great combine for promoting just one grace—say kindness to man and beast—what a transformation in the spirit and character of the nation would follow! Christmas is a time of self-forgetfulness. By a common sentiment the nation for a season will stop considering only its own. People think of others. They think nothing of the cost, the inconvenience, the time involved. And why? Simply because of the joy they anticipate their little gifts or acts will bring into other lives beside their own. Unconsciously they demonstrate the power and beauty of self-denial. And there is no pleasure so pure, no reward so high and no trait in human character so divine-like as that which springs from self-denying love. Let the United States—all the people—strive long to remember the needs of others and not forget with the new year, as they would forget an old bonnet, and it will be blessed, a thrice-blessed compensation. Christmas is also a time of peace. Under the magnetism of the great truth symbolized in the greatest event of the world's history, the tongue of strife is silent and humanity drinks from the sweet waters of love and charity—a picture of what the world will be when this spirit holds dominion over the human will and heart. If peace is ever to be established on earth it must be founded on this basis, and we can only arrive at it in the good old-fashioned way—by individual renunciation of the will and the realization and manifestation of the spirit and purpose of Jesus Christ.



William Booth

"Sometimes—in our grave house Observe this happeneth not; But at times, the evergreen boughs And the holly leaves all forgot; And then—'hat then?' Why, the mistletoe! Oh, brave is the laurel and brave is the holly! But the mistletoe banisheth melancholy! Ah, nobody knows, nor ever shall know, What is done under the mistletoe!"

BARRY CORNWALL said that—or, to be precise, he wrote it—in his prelude to the masque, "Recollections of Old Christmas," which was performed, by the desire of Lady Londesborough, at Grimston, in 1859.

It is only a few years since Americans in large cities began to appreciate the significance of mistletoe, which immemorial usage had made indispensable for the English Christmas.

At first specially imported, as shamrocks were specially imported afterward from Ireland in March, it has spread from the homes of the traveled rich and those stray farmhouses where the tradition had been cherished through the centuries, to the trays and baskets of street vendors, until now none so dull as to be blind to the "new" Christmas fashion—and few so poor as to forfeit its delicious privileges.

But we have merely rediscovered the England of ages and ages ago, which we tried to forget when we exchanged free mistletoe for free tea, so that we might tax both of them ourselves when we chose to; we have only carried ourselves back to the beginning of our oldest Christmas emblem, the Christmas tree.

BACK TO THE DRUIDS

And we have heretized ourselves from our very Christianity to don the shaggy bearskins and bear the barbarous spears of the Druids that we were. That good Pope Gregory who, as a Roman deacon, beheld the blonde British slaves in the market place and paid them the memorable compliment, "Not Angles, but angels," had a memory as long as his wit was keen. He bore in mind those fair and blooming faces, with their aureoles of flame and gold, which made him think of the heaven he aspired to, and he could not bear to think of those wretched souls as fallen forever into the pit of paganism.

How he became bishop of Rome, and knew the world for his footstool, the marriage of Bertha, daughter of the Frankish king, Chlodbert of Paris, with Aethelberht, king of Kent gave him the opportunity he awaited. Kent's new queen was a Christian. Through her, and other arrangements with the rulers of Gaul, Pope Gregory sent St. Augustine with a band of monks to England to save the fallen angels his artistic spirit loved. They landed, in the year 597, where Hengest had landed a century before them, in the Isle of Thanet. King Aethelberht, seated out in the open on the chalk down,