A Very Merry Christmas

Origins of Famous Christmas Carols

Since that first Christmas when the angels sang "Glory to God in the Highest," music has been a vital part of the holiday season: schools, churches and homes ring with joyous hymns and songs. The first singing of carols in the streets, we are told, was in the year 1224.

When we think of Christmas, we think of the pictures you see on Christmas cards of houses almost buried in snow, candles burning in windows, and carolers grouped around a doorway, singing with all their hearts to the distant peal of church bells. Christmas must have been picturesque in those days, no automobiles whizzing by, just the merry jingle of sleigh bells.

"Hark, the Herald Angels Sing" was written in 1730 by Charles Wesley, younger brother of John Wesley, who founded the Methodist denomination, but was not published until 1856. Inspiration for the poem came to Wesley as he walked to church one Christmas morning.

Bishop Phillip Brooks, rector of the Holy Trinity Church in Philadelphia, was asked by his Sunday school children to write a Christmas song, so in 1868, he produced "Oh Little Town of Bethlehem." After writing the hymn, he went to the church organist and asked him to furnish a tune. The organist, Lewis H. Redner, says the air came to him in a Christmas dream, and it was finished for the next day's services.

Origin of "Silent Night"

But most beloved of all Christmas music is "Silent Night, Holy Night," written, we are told, by Father Josef Mohr, who found himself without means of music for the Christmas services because mice had eaten the bellows of the church organ. Father Josef was greatly troubled over the calamity, and as he returned from administering rites to a dying woman, he stood on a hilltop, at midnight, and it came to him that it must have been just such a silent night that the Christ child was born, so he went home and composed the words to our famous Christmas hymn.

Then, of course, it needed music, so he went to his old schoolmaster, Franz Gruber. And so Franz played his guitar and Father Josef sang a Christmas hymn that will never die.

Few think of this lovely hymn without remembering how we once watched our radio dial at Christmas time for its rendition by one of the most beloved of singers, Mme. Schumann-Heink.

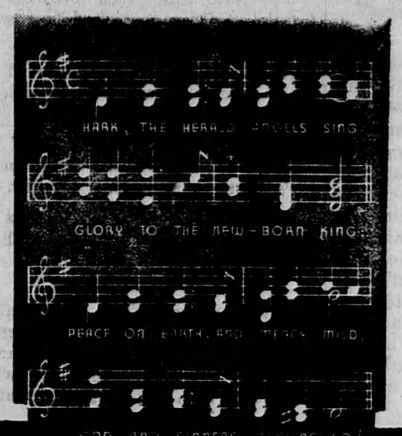
Oh, those were days of simplicity when rectors, casting about for suitable Christmas programs turned poets, and organists turned composers to furnish the music, music that goes on forever!

They would, indeed, be gratified if they could hear our present-day Christmas programs, pouring out of a little cabinet in the corner, their labors of love have come a long way from that steel guitar and a gentle voice replacing a nibbled bellows, they'd be surprised to learn their flock now does its Christmas shopping to their inspirational tunes.

SAME OLD SANTA

Same old Santa, same old joys,
Same old dolls and sleds and toys;
Same old holly, same old tree,
Same old gifts for cherubs wee;
Same old carol, same old light,
Same old stockings hung at night;
Same old words of merry cheer,
Same good wishes for the year.
Same old Christmas! Seems to me
That's the way it ought to be.

"Christ Is Born In Bethlehem"



Christmas—When Did It Begin?

The earliest celebration of the birth of Christ, on December 25 of each year, took place in the fourth century, and the custom spread from the Western to the Eastern Church. Before that date, the commemoration of Christ's Nativity and Baptism was held on January 6. The first mention of Christmas is found in a Roman document known as the "Philocalian Calendar," in the year 354, and the first time the festival was celebrated in Britain was in 598, when St. Augustine baptized 10,000 converts.

In the year 567, the Council of Tours declared a 12-day festival from Christmas to Epiphany, and later—991-1016—the laws of Ethelred ordained that all strife should cease at Christmas. In Germany, Christmas was established in 813 by the Synod of Mainz, and in Norway by King Hakon the Good, in the year 950.

Jest 'Fore Christmas

Father calls me William, sister calls me Will,
Mother calls me Willie, but the fellers call me Bill!
Mighty glad I ain't a girl—ruther be a boy,
Without them sashes, curls ,an' things that's worn by Fauntleroy!
Love to chawnk green apples an' go swimmin' in the lake—
Hate to take the castor-ile they give for belly-ache!
'Most all the time, the whole year round, there ain't no flies on me,
But jest 'fore Christmas I'm as good as I kin be!

Got a yeller dog named Sport, sick him on the cat;
First thing she knows she doesn't know where she is at!
Got a clipper sled, an' when us kids goes out to slide,
'Long comes the grocery cart, an' we all hook a ride!
But sometimes when the grocery man is worrited an' cross,
He reaches at us with his whip, an' larrups up his hoss,
An' then I laff an' holler, "Oh, ye never teched me!"
But jest 'fore Christmas I'm as good as I kin be!

Gran'ma says she hopes that when I git to be a man,
I'll be a missionarer like her oldest brother, Dan,
As was et up by the cannibuls that lives in Ceylon's Isle,
Where every prospeck pleases, an' only man is vile!
But gran'ma she has never been to see a Wild West show,
Nor read the Life of Daniel Boone, or else I guess she'd know
That Buff'lo Bill and cow-boys is good enough for me!
Excep' jest 'afore Christmas, when I'm good as I kin be!

And then old Sport he hangs around, so solemn-like an' still,
His eyes they keep a-sayin': "What's the matter, little Bill?"
The old cat sneaks down off her perch an' wonders what's become
Of them two enemies of hern that used to make things hum!
But I am so perlite an' 'tend so earnestly to biz,
That mother says to father: "How improved our Willie is!"
But father, havin' been a boy himself, suspicions me
When, jest 'fore Christmas, I'm as good as I kin be!

For Christmas, with its lots an' lots of candies, cakes, an' toys,
Was made, they say, for proper kids an' not for naughty boys;
So wash yer face an' bresh yer hair, an' mind yer p's an' q's,
An' don't bust out yer pantaloons, an' don't wear out yer shoes;
Say "Yessum" to the ladies, an' "Yessur" to the men,
An' when they's company, don't pass yer plate for pie again;
But, thinkin' of the things yer'd like to see upon that tree,
Jest 'fore Christmas be as good as yer kin be!

Eugene Field [1850-1895]

THE HOUSE OF CHRISTMAS

This world is wild as an old wives' tale,
And strange the plain things are,
The earth is enough and the air is enough
For our wonder and our war;
But our rest is as far as the fire-drake swings
And our peace is put in impossible things
When clashed and thundered unthinkable wings
Round an incredible star.
To an open house in the evening
Home shall men come,
To an older place than Eden
And a taller town than Rome;
To the end of the way of the wandering star,
To the things that cannot be and that are,
To the place where God was homeless
And all men are at home.

By G. K. CHESTERTON

A Visit From St. Nicholas

'Twas the night before Christmas, when all through the house
Not a creature was stirring, not even a mouse;
The stockings were hung by the chimney with care,
In hopes that St. Nicholas soon would be there;
The children were nestled all sung in their beds,
While visions of sugar-plums danced in their heads;
And mamma in her 'kerchief, and I in my cap,
Had just settled our brains for a long winter's nap,
When out on the lawn there arose such a clatter,
I sprang from the bed to see what was the matter.
Away to the window I flew like a flash,
Tore open the shutters and threw up the sash.
The moon on the breast of the new-fallen snow
Gave the lustre of mid-day to objects below,
When, what to my wondering eyes should appear,
But a miniature sleigh, and eight tiny reindeer,
With a little old driver, so lively and quick,
I knew in a moment it must be St. Nick.
More rapid than eagles his coursers they came,
And he whistled, and shouted, and called them by name;
"Now, **Dasher!** now, **Dancer!** now, **Prancer** and **Vixen!**
On, Comet! on **Cupid!** on, **Donder** and **Blitzen!**
To the top of the porch! to the top of the wall!
Now dash away! dash away! dash away all!"
As dry leaves that before the wild hurricane fly,
When they meet with an obstacle, mount to the sky,
So up to the house-top the coursers they flew,
With the sleigh full of toys, and St. Nicholas too.
And then, in a twinkling, I heard on the roof
The prancing and pawing of each little hoof.
As I drew in my head, and was turning around,
Down the chimney St. Nicholas came with a bound.
He was dressed all in fur, from his head to his foot,
And his clothes were all tarnished with ashes and soot;
A bundle of toys he had flung on his back,
And he looked like a peddler just opening his pack,
His eyes—how they twinkled! his dimples how merry!
His cheeks were like roses, his nose like a cherry!
His droll little mouth was drawn up like a bow,
And the beard of his chin was as white as the snow;
The stump of a pipe he held tight in his teeth,
And the smoke it encircled his head like a wreath;
He had a broad face and a little round belly,
That shook, when he laughed, like a bowlful of jelly.
He was chubby and plump, a right jolly old elf,
And I laughed when I saw him, in spite of myself;
A wink of his eye and a twist of his head,
Soon gave me to know I had nothing to dread;
He spoke not a word, but went straight to his work,
And filled all the stockings; then turned with a jerk,
And laying his finger aside of his nose,
And giving a nod, up the chimney he rose;
He sprang to his sleigh, to his team gave a whistle,
And away they all flew like the down of a thistle.
But I heard him exclaim, ere he drove out of sight,
"Happy Christmas to all, and to all a good-night."

Clement Clarke Moore [1779-1863]

The Christmas Story

NOW when Jesus was born in Bethlehem of Judea in the days of Herod the king, behold, there came wise men from the east to Jerusalem.

Saying, Where is He that is born King of the Jews? for we have seen His star in the east, and are come to worship Him.

When Herod the king had heard these things he was troubled; and all Jerusalem with him. And when he had gathered all the chief priests and scribes of the people together, he demanded of them where Christ should be born.

And they said unto him, In Bethlehem of Judea: for thus it is written by the prophet; And thou Bethlehem, in the land of Juda, art not the least among the princes of Juda: for out of thee shall come a Governor, that shall rule My people Israel.

Then Herod, when he had privily called the wise men, enquired of them diligently what time the star appeared.

And he sent them to Bethlethem, and said, Go and search diligently for the young Child; and when ye have found Him,bring me word again, that I may come and worship Him also.

When they had heard the king, they departed; and lo, the star, which they saw in the east, went before them, till it came and stood over where the young Child was.

When they saw the star, they rejoiced with exceeding great joy. And when they were come into the house, they saw the young Child with Mary His mother, and fell down, and worshipped Him: and when they had opened their treasures, they presented unto Him gifts; gold and frankincense, and myrrh. And being warned of God in a dream that they should not return to Herod, they departed into their own country another way.

And when they were departed, behold, the angel of the Lord appeareth to Joseph in a dream, saying, Arise, and take the young Child and His mother, and flee into Egypt, and be thou there until I bring thee word: for Herod will seek the young Child to destroy Him.

When he arose, he took the young Child and His mother by night and departed into Egypt: And was there until the death of Herod, that it might be fulfilled which was spoken of the Lord by the prophet, saying, Out of Egypt have I called My Son.

Matthew 2:1-15.