

Christmas With Dickens



EIGHTY-ONE years have passed since Charles Dickens gave to a delighted world the first of his far too few Christmas stories, whose tenderness, humour, and great-hearted humanity made him the most beloved of British authors.

It was in the autumn of 1843, when he was living with his young family in Devonshire Terrace, Regent's Park, that "A Christmas Carol, in Prose—being a Ghost story for Christmas," was written (like most of Dickens' work) at high pressure. At the time he was working on "Chuzzlewit"—a race against time; but it was no less important that the "Carol" should make its appearance for Christmas.

Thus week after week he was at his desk a dozen hours or more a day, exhausting himself and his nerves to a dangerous extent. And when he could write no more he would sally forth on long aimless walks through the London streets, covering a dozen or fifteen miles before, in the early hours of the morning, he sought his bed. "He never left home," we read, "before the owls went out, and led the most solitary of lives." And as with "The Chimes" a year later, as he wrote "The Carol" he "laughed and wept again, and excited himself in the most extraordinary manner."

"The Carol" was quick to find its way into the hearts of the reading public.

It was a direct appeal of heart to heart such as few, if any, could resist. Copies were sold in thousands, as fast as they could be produced; Dickens was deluged with letters from all parts of the world, full of gratitude and admiration.

The manuscript of "The Carol" has had many vicissitudes since Dickens presented it to his old school-fellow, Thomas Milton. Fifty years ago it was sold for \$250 to a bookseller, Mr. Harvey, who resold it to George Churchill, a collector. In 1882 it changed hands again for \$1,000; and a little later was sold for \$1,500 to Stuart Samuel, of Kensington Palace Gardens. Of its later history nothing definite is known.

On November 4, 1844, Dickens wrote the last word of "The Chimes," probably the most beautiful and best-loved of his Christmas stories, and, as he put down his pen and looked down from this study window on the waters of the Mediterranean, mirroring the blue Italian sky, the tears began to stream down his cheeks, and, resting his head on his hands, he "sobbed like a child."

Some minutes later he took up his pen again and wrote these words to his friend, John Forster: "Half past two, afternoon, Thank God! I have just finished 'The Chimes.' I take up my pen only to say that much and to add that I have had what women call a 'real good cry.'"

For weeks he had been writing at high pressure, "in a fever of inspiration." He had lived with and for his book; and as his pen flew over the sheets he laughed and cried with his characters, and generally, as he confessed, "behaved like an idiot." And when at last he had to say good-bye to them it was as though he stood by the graveside of loved ones. "Day after day," he says, "I was in my bath at seven o'clock and an hour later I was working at my desk, blazing away, resolutely and red-hot, for seven or eight hours at a stretch, until my hand refused to work any more."

"I had almost finished the story, and, rack my brains as I would and did, I simply could not think of a title. Then one morning as I sat down at my desk, the bells of Genoa broke, as if by one consent, into a merry, almost deafening peal; and I had it 'The Chimes!' 'The Chimes!' That was the very title I wanted, but could not find."

A month after Dickens had wiped the tears off his eyes in Genoa he was reading "The Chimes" to a group of friends in his study in London, to such an accompaniment of laughter and tears as surely no book before had ever, and a week later all London was talking of the wonderful Christmas story and clamouring for copies. On the day of publication it is said 20,000 copies were sold, and before the year closed the book had added \$7,500 to Dickens' bank balance.

A little later the story was dramatised, and when the play was read to a group of actors, it is said, Macready and Gilbert a' Beckett were "so overcome with emotion that Mr. Forster was obliged to suspend the reading until they had recovered."

So brilliantly successful had his first two Christmas stories been that Dickens set to work with a light heart on number three; though in addition to much other work, he was in the thick of harassing labour and anxieties of launching a newspaper—the Daily News. He had hoped to start a weekly paper, which he proposed to call the "Cricket" with the motto: "A cheerful creature that chirrup on the hearth"; but as this was impossible with his hands so full, he wrote at a great expenditure of nervous energy, a Christmas story which he dubbed the "Cricket on the Hearth," which, to his delight, proved as successful as its predecessors.

Christmas Joy

THE universal joy of Christmas is certainly wonderful. We ring the bells when princes are born, or toll a mournful dirge when great men pass away. Nations have their red-letter days, their carnivals and festivals, but once in the year and only once, the whole world stands still to celebrate the advent of a life. Only Jesus of Nazareth claims this worldwide, undying remembrance. You cannot cut Christmas out of the Calendar, nor out of the heart of the world.—Anon.



"KISS FIRST"



Shopping Abroad at Christmas

ONE would think that Christmas shopping and Christmas feeling would be the same all over the earth where Christmas is celebrated. But they are, funnily enough, just as different for instance, as an Englishman and a Frenchman. It seems as if the constant moving or not moving at all in crowds and the also constant paying out of good money calls forth the most primitive instincts in people and makes all nations revert to their own antediluvian selves during the month of Christmas shopping.

Take New York for instance. We all know they have tons of money and great gifts for advertising. We also know that when we worm our way through their blazing city in electric colors swarming with Santa Clauses driving real imported reindeer and enter their stores, full of the most luxurious gifts to be had for millions, we can, with a good conscience kick and punch ourselves to our caveman's heart content without any risk of being ruder than any other people are.

In Paris people haven't got the physical strength of the Yankees, which makes them all the more vociferous. By the time we have passed the scolding cursing army of children aged 1 to 70 years, queuing up to see "Zig and Puce" and other comic strip heroes bob up and

down in the show windows, risking our lives, clothes and watchchain (you never get home with more than one of the three) and are lucky enough at that! getting through the cursing-scolding crowd inside; and trying to persuade the deeply offended shop girls to let us have the parcels we paid for; why, even long before then we have lost whatever self-respect we used to possess.

In Berlin there is no rush. People move around very deliberately and calculate

in their minds at every new discovery how much cheaper they will be able to buy the thing during the sale in January. Consequently Christmas shopping is a very steady-going affair, while in January all thrifty German housewives fight like maenads to get the best bargains.

In England people become even more English than usual during December. Everybody moves in the crowd as if he were alone in the world, there are more "Sorrays," more polite holding the doors for other people, more conventional tradition to follow than at any other time of the year.

The festive season has not always been associated with turkey, plum pudding, and the other dainties we now link up with it. But it has always been a time of good cheer. In the old days, however, the boar's head was the traditional Christmas dish.



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