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## Christmas in French Canada.

A MORE romantic setting for a Christmas festivity could hardly be imagined than the Province of Quebec, which aside from historical association, possesses many quaint beliefs and traditions transplanted from "La Vieille France" or adopted from contact with the English and the other European neighbors. The tendency of these has been to acquire a coloring from frequent repetition and local conditions until they have become characteristic of the country. A Christmas legend, traced to old country sources, is "La Chasse Galerie." This is based on the belief that at certain times of the year, on Christmas Eve for instance, the voyageur or hunter in his canoe can pledge his soul to the devil in return for the ability to fly through the air to some distant point.

Doctor Frechette told us that "one Sunday morning coming out of church the inhabitants of St. Jean Deschailons saw, at broad daylight, passing through the air, a canoe mounted by a crew of shantymen in red flannel shirts, paddling in time with a "chanson de voyageur." It was—as you may well imagine—an effect of mirage, produced by a real canoe passing on the river hidden by the angle of the cliff; but it created an immense sensation at the time. With many people the imagination requires very little stimulation. In Europe the belief is traceable in the "Grand Veneur," or the "Chasseur Noir" (the Black Huntsman). This is always a hunting party with horses, dogs and attendants, but the stories turn on the same idea. Another story along this line is that travellers, passing along a lonely road at night and speaking sacrilegiously or boasting that they feared neither God nor the devil, have been overtaken by a mysterious black steed and borne swiftly through the air. The spell could be broken only by mentioning the name of the Devil, or by making the sign of the cross.

The French-Canadian Christmas is chiefly a religious festival and the larger part of the ceremonies and festivities cluster about the parish church. Ask an old French-Canadian how Christmas is celebrated and he will most likely begin to tell of the "cantiques" or hymns sung at the celebration of mass or by the fireside. In the home, Christmas is much less important than New Year's or "le Jour de l'An," when most of the gift giving takes place. Presents are often given for religious purposes on Christmas, or to church officials, especially by the well-to-do. Children usually expect some trifle in the line of toys or candles, and hang up their stockings, or place their shoes by the fireside as other Canadian children do, but the larger part of the looked-for presents (called "Etrennes") are given on New Year's Eve. French-Canadians shout "Noel" and try each to get it on the other first, in the same way as English-speaking Canadians shout "Merry Christmas," or "Christmas Box." There is always plenty of good cheer at this season, with pleasant family reunions as well as at the New Year, while both church and home, and especially the former, are lavishly decorated with flowers, evergreens and other tokens of the season.

The custom practised by children of hanging up the stocking on Christmas Eve was derived from France. It then spread to Germany and other countries. In many of the numerous French convents the boarder used to place her silk stocking at the door of the Mother Abbess, recommending herself at the same time to the good St. Nicholas. The placing of shoes by the fireside has long been practised in Italy, the idea being to surprise people when they came to put on their shoes. French children have the same custom. After the drive, or walk through the crisp wintry air to midnight mass, comes the "reveillon," a banquet or feast at which friends and members of the family are assembled. An attack is made on the good things prepared, which include delicious "tourteries," a kind of pie, and "croquignoles" or doughnuts, without which a French-Canadian Christmas would be incomplete. Toasts are made and songs are sung, sometimes until a late hour. An excellent translation of a characteristic Christmas ballad is given by the late Wm. McLennan:

Whence are thou, my maiden,  
Whence are thou?  
I come from the stable  
Where this very night,  
I, a shepherd maiden,  
Saw a wondrous sight.

What saw'st thou, my maiden,  
What saw'st thou?  
There within a manger  
A little child I saw,  
Lying softly sleeping,  
On the golden straw.

Nothing more, my maiden,  
Nothing more?  
I saw the Holy Mother,  
The little Baby hold,  
And the father, Joseph,  
A-tremble with the cold.

Nothing more, my maiden,  
Nothing more?  
I saw the ass and oxen  
Kneeling meek and mild  
With their gentle breathing  
Warm the Holy Child.

Nothing more, my maiden,  
Nothing more?  
There were three bright angels  
Come down from the sky,  
Singing forth sweet praises  
To the Father high.

Among old country French people Christmas cakes and bread are believed to have strongly medicinal virtues, in line with the

English "white loaf," mentioned by Herrick and other writers. This was composed of the finest and whitest wheat flour, a luxury at that time, and only to be enjoyed at Christmas and Easter. In Provence a large loaf of the best and whitest flour obtainable was baked on Christmas Eve, and was called "le pain de Calende." A piece was cut from this, three or four crosses marked on it with a knife, after which it was carefully put away and kept as a remedy for various ailments. In Central France a similar loaf is made; a portion is kept until the following Christmas, and supposed never to go sour or mouldy. If a person or an animal falls sick a small piece is cut from the portion preserved, and given to the patient as an unfailing remedy. In Quebec the "pain benit," or bread blessed by the priest, is sometimes used in searching for drowned persons, the belief being that if the piece of bread is cast into the water it will come to a standstill above the dead body. In Berri, in France, the bakers make cakes, in the form of the infant Jesus, while a curious kind of crescent-shaped cakes, called "bullock's horns," is made by the peasantry and distributed among their poorer neighbors. In many parts of France cakes are made in the form of the Virgin, the infant Jesus, the "creche" or crib, the wise men, or a representation of the nativity. There seem to be somewhat after the style of the "Babe cakes" or "Yule doughs," formerly made in England, and which aroused the fierce anger of the Puritans.

In Provence, Brittany, and in France Comte these celebrations assume a quaint form, recalling heathen festivals. The festivities commence with a big supper, all fasting and mortification being set aside. The table is set before the fireplace, where sparkles the glowing "carigule," the trunk of an old olive tree crowned with laurels carefully dried and prepared. Supper over, the family sit about the fire until midnight, the time of the first mass, which everyone scrupulously attends. The night of December 24th is more of a fete than the following day. The poor are permitted to beg all night, often singing hymns to touch the hearts of the listeners. The children throw alms from the windows in paper purses to which they have set fire for purposes of guidance.

Among the old country French peasantry, with whom superstition is still deeply rooted, it is customary to leave upon the table on Christmas Eve "la part des morts," or the share of the dead, a touching evidence of the desire to remember the departed at a time when all are rejoicing. "Les Fetes de Noel," or Christmas festivities in some districts last for three days. In various localities, especially in the neighborhood of Marseilles, a theatrical performance takes place, representing the nativity. "Noel! Noel!" was, up to the middle of the sixteenth century, the joyful cry of England, learned from her vanquisher, William the Conqueror.

### Share the Joys of Christ Day.

Christmas brings with it a joy unlike any other the world has ever known—a pleasure pure, exalting and universal. No other religion has brought to its followers such a festival, which commemorates the "unspeakable gift" of God's own Son to a sinful race. The song of the herald angels is still sounding in the hearts of men. No musician, be he ever so gifted, might reproduce those heavenly strains; no human painter might hope to adequately picture the glorious scene. Christ's lowly advent in the Bethlehem manger set all the bells of heaven a-ringing, and awoke the celestial chorus, while nature hushed to listen.

If we, too, would hear the angel-song in our hearts, and feel the true joy of the Christmas-tide, let us give to others the best in us for the sake of Him who was the "unspeakable" gift to men. On our loved ones we will shower the usual tokens of affection, but there is a vast outside constituency to whom the Christmas festival will bring little cheer unless it comes from the hands and hearts of God's people. Let us not forget them at this season, when all the world is rejoicing.

If ye would hear the angels sing,  
Christians! see ye let each door  
Stand wider than ever it stood before.  
On Christmas day in the morning.

Consecrate the festival by making your gifts carry with them a part of your own life. Then, no matter how inconspicuous they may be, if they are given with the whole heart and in His name, they will be royal gifts indeed.

When the three wise men rode from the East on that "first best Christmas night" they bore on their saddlebags three caskets filled with gold and frankincense and myrrh; to be laid at the feet of the manger-craddled Babe of Bethlehem. Beginning with this old, old journey, the spirit of giving crept into the world's heart. As the Magi came bearing gifts, so do we also. Gifts that relieve want, gifts that are sweet and fragrant with friendship, gifts that breathe love, gifts that mean service, gifts inspired still by the star that shone over the city of David nearly two thousand years ago.

When the Christmas season comes,  
Think of others;  
Give a glance outside your homes,  
Men are brothers,  
There are many hearts so sad,  
You may help to make them glad,  
Few the joys that some have had—  
Think of others.

### The Whole World Is One.

The civilized world salutes Christmas with a homage as fresh and as joyful as though the glorious message were only of yesterday. Far removed from the religious spirit is some of the merry-making, but this only renders more striking the universality and unwearied zeal of the celebration. There are many other occasions for merry-making in the calendar, but none is observed on the same scale or with the same energy as Christmas. Moreover, there is nothing so markedly seductive about plum-pudding and mince pies, or holly and mistletoe, to account for a unanimity of rejoicing which throws every other into the shade.

The truth is, Christmas, in a sense the least sectarian of all the institutions of the church, embodies the ethical essential of Christian teaching before which all men must bow—which neither the critic nor the schismatic, nor even the heretic can murmur at. This ethical essential survives the wrangles of the theologians on specific doctrines, and is the true test of the vitality and sufficiency of the Christian dispensation.

There is, perhaps, another reason for the indestructibility of Christmas. As the centuries have rolled on men have recognized that Christmas not only pictures a hope but enjoins a duty. The passive watching for the Golden Age has refreshed itself with active attempts.

To learn its worth

By startin' a branch establishment,  
And runnin' it here on earth.

A passion to make the world better, a resolve to cope with the eternal problem of evil, has filled the hearts and minds of good men and women, and so, in increased human sympathy and love, the lesson of Christmas has entwined itself anew with our daily lives.

### Antecedents of Christmas.

The observance of the Twenty-fifth of December as a feast-day, did not originate as a Christian rejoicing. The old Norsemen celebrated their festival of Yule at this identical season, and from their ceremonies have been derived many customs later associated exclusively with Christmas. Hilarious, yet weird, was this Yule-tide. Deep in the heart of the forest was usually built the great arbor which was to serve as a banquet-hall, its walls of evergreen branches, adorned with the trophies of the chase, with an especial garland of holly boughs and ivy above the seat of honor, where sat the great man of the vicinity. The feast consisted of "oxen, sheep and goats, roasted whole in pits dug in the hillsides and lined with stones; or joints of these animals seethed in cauldrons made of their own skins sewed together and filled with water." Finally, the wassail bowl was passed around, the Yule-log was set alight, and the company gathered round to listen to the "Scalds" who recited or sang long stories of the prowess of their race.

About the year 70, Clemens Romanus fixed upon December 25th, for the Nativity to be annually commemorated; and when Gregory the Great sent St. Augustine to convert the Saxons, he directed them to conform the ceremonies of Christian worship as far as possible to those of the heathen, that they might not be antagonized by too startling a change. Accordingly, the holly and mistletoe—hitherto sacred to the god Balder—were retained, the green holly and other evergreens as a memorial of the green branches borne on Christ's triumphal entry into Jerusalem; the mistletoe, whose berries grow in clusters of three, as a symbol of the Trinity; the songs of the Scalds were metamorphosed into Christmas carols; the Yule-log still held a place of honor, being brought into the hall with great ceremony, and left there as a platform upon which each should sing his Christmas song before it was rolled on the fire.

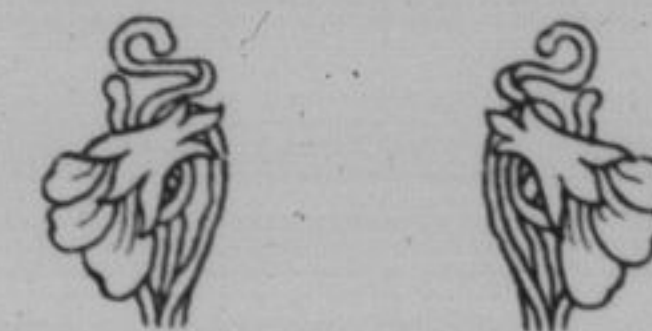
Among Anglo-Normans, who were fond of magnificence, these ceremonies developed into great pageants, jousts and tournaments, while mere amusement became more strongly marked. In the rude, rush-strewn halls, the great men of the land, with their friends and retainers, sat about tables whose luxurious extravagance rivalled the sensuous days of Greece and Rome. Forks were not yet used, and the bones were invariably thrown under the table. Feast followed feast, amusement followed amusement, until the heyday of all came in the time of "Queen Bess," when the festival lasted twelve days. At that time it was customary for each nobleman or his representative to stand, immediately after church on Christmas Day, at the gates of his domain, and dispense alms to all who asked for them. He then repaired to the hall of the castle, the Yule-log was brought in with great merriment, the servants sang their Christmas song sitting on it or grouped about it, after which each was presented with a Yule-cake in the form of an infant, or with an image of the Christ-child stamped upon it. Finally, the dinner was served, the wassail-bowl was passed round, and games and pageants went on with mirth.

In those days it was customary for the "great folk" to form the audience, while the servants and yeoman supplied the amusement. All dined in the same hall, the nobleman and his friends occupying a table apart, or at the upper end, with the commonry below. Sometimes as many as sixteen courses of meat were served—boar's head, capons, domestic fowl and game, peacocks with feathers and all intact, frumenty, mince pies, plum pudding, and all the sweets of the time. The boar's head, the invariable piece de resistance, was brought in on a huge platter, wreathed with bay, to the music of the minstrels, and with an exaggerated rejoicing measured to its supposed appropriateness as a dish which Jews could not eat.

Christmas became such a time for revelry and excess that the inevitable reaction came. In 1625, Parliament prohibited its observance, and in the days of Puritanism men were fined for nailing greenery above a church-door on Christmas Day. Indeed under the shower of Puritan arrows, the aesthetic adjuncts of the day were in danger of disappearing, along with the mince pies, banished from the table on the ground that eating them was sin. But Puritanism in this, as in many other things, overshot the mark, while, perhaps, exercising some influence in the work of purification, about plum-pudding and mince pies, or holly and the mistletoe, and home festivals and gift-giving, came back to stay, with the ringing of church-bells and the quiet yet happy reveries of the Christmas-tide.

Christmas day is one of supreme gladness. Christianity came in with joy. The Song of the Nativity is the song of songs, for it has given birth to a world of singing. There was not much singing before Christ came; there is not much to-day where He is unknown.

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