

The World's Greatest Stories of Christmas

SOMEHOW or other, and at some time or other, the spirit of Christmas has descended upon pretty nearly every famous writer, and has inspired him to a Christmas story, or an essay, or a sermon—for your famous writers can be pious enough when the spirit moves them.

Odd and interesting Christmases remain, embalmed, like rare and spicy fruit cakes of literature, in those pages which are too often left shut on library shelves; for we of this country especially are prone to make our own Christmas, and to believe sincerely that no other Christmas can be quite so delightful or quite so happily picturesque.

But when we happen, by some fortunate chance or some impulse of recollection, to hunt through the volumes for the Christmas which we would like to enjoy if we weren't so resolutely content with our own, it is astonishing how many different ways other Christians have had of making Christmas joyful—and how every way, including ours, agrees with the others in choosing for the best of Christmas that straightforward kindness and sincerity which lie back of the best Christmas sermon, and the best-known, that has been written.

It is as though that rare soul of Robert Louis Stevenson's had been reserved to speak to mankind after the way had been prepared for him by all the rest—after Thackeray's shrewd good-humor, after Dickens' effusive heartiness, after Irving's picture of fond Christmas hospitality, after Hawthorne's grim morality play, and after Wallace's vivid picturing of the first Christmas the world beheld. His immortal "To be honest, to be kind," seems to have struck, fully and firmly, the great human chord that underlay all those more impressive writings, although every one of them was true and often far more brilliant.

So, like the prelude that gives the theme of all that is to come, here is the passage of Stevenson's "Christmas Sermon" that has gone around the world:

Stevenson's Christmas Sermon

TO BE honest, to be kind; to earn a little and to spend a little less; to make upon the whole a family happier for his presence, to renounce when that shall be necessary and not be embittered; to keep a few friends, but those without captivation above all, of the same grim condition, to keep friends with himself—here is a task for all that a man has of fortitude and delicacy. He has an ambitious soul who would ask more; he has a hopeful spirit who should look in such an enterprise to be successful. There is indeed one element in human destiny that not blindness itself can convert; whatever else we are intended to do, we are not intended to succeed; failure is the fate allotted. It is so in every art and study; it is so above all in the continent of living well. Here is a pleasant thought for the year's end or for the end of life: only self-deception will be satisfied, and there need be no despair for the despairer.



The Saviour's Birthplace, from Lew Wallace's "Ben Hur"

IT WAS General Lew Wallace who, in the most reverent spirit and with advantages of knowledge as to eastern manners and customs rivaling those of the artist Tissot, re-constituted the scenes that attended the birth of the Saviour, in his famous story, "Ben Hur." After recounting the difficulties which Joseph and Mary and their companions, the family of the Beth-Israhelites, experienced until they reached the khan, he proceeds:

The Nazarene went back joyfully to Mary and the Beth-Israhelites. In little while the latter brought up his family, the women mounted on donkeys. The wife was matronly, the daughters were images of what she must have been in youth; and as they drew near the door, the people knew them to be of the humble class. "This is she of whom I spoke," said the Nazarene, "and these are our friends." "Mary's eyes and hair of gold," muttered the steward to himself, seeing her. "So looked the young king when he went to sing before Saul." He took the leading man from Joseph and said to Mary, "Peace to you, O daughter of David!" Then to the others, "Peace to you all." Then to Joseph, "Rabbi, follow me."

by habits of life easily satisfied. To the Jew of that period, moreover, abode in caverns was a familiar idea, made so by everyday occurrences, and by what he heard of Sabbaths in the synagogues. How much of Jewish history, how many of the most exciting incidents in that history, had treasured in caves! Yet further, these people were Jews of Bethlehem, with whom the idea was especially commonplace; for their locality abounded with caves great and small, some of which had been dwelling-places from the time of the Emins and Hortes. No more was there offense to them in the fact that the caverns to which they were being taken had been, or was, a stable. They were the descendants of a race of herdsmen, whose flocks habitually shared both their habits and wanderings. In keeping with a custom derived from Abraham, the tent of the Bedawin yet shelters his horses and children alike. So they obeyed the keeper cheerfully, and gazed at the horse, feeling only a natural curiosity. Everything associated with the history of David was interesting to them.

The building was low and narrow, projecting but a little from the rock to which it was joined at the rear, and wholly without a window. In its blank front there was a door, swung on enormous hinges, and thickly daubed with ochreous clay. While the wooden bolt of the door was being pushed back, the women were excited from their pillows. Upon the opening of the door, the keeper called out:



The guests entered, and stared about them. It became apparent immediately that the house was but a mask or covering for the mouth of a natural cave or grotto, probably forty feet high, and ten or twelve feet wide. The light streamed through the doorway, over an uneven floor, falling upon piles of grain and fodder, and earthenware and household property,

Chackeray and the Christmas Tree, from "Round About the Christmas Tree"

THERE is, about the Christmas tree as Thackeray pictures it in the "Roundabout Papers" under the particular title of "Round about the Christmas Tree," just such an atmosphere of realism applied to the old of these later days as is felt in Wallace's depiction of the first Christmas. Every one has his little worries and troubles now, as all had their anxieties then, and it takes the Christmas spirit to gloss them over into cheer and hopefulness. His undertone of satire, never kinder or more friendly, brings us all closer to the joys as well as the small worries that surround the Christmas tree.

The kindly Christmas tree, from which I trust every gentle reader has pulled a bonbon or two, is yet all aflame with it, and sparkles with the sweet fruits of its season. You young ladies, may you have plucked pretty giftlings from it; and out of the cracked sugar plum which you have split with the captain of those delicious conundrums which the confectioners introduce into the sweetmeats, and which apply to the cunningest of love. Those riddles are, to be read at your age, when I dare say they are significant. As for Dolly, Merry, and Nell, who are standing at the tree, they don't care about the love-riddle part, but understand the sweet almond portion very well. They are 4, 5 and 6 years old. Patience, little people! A dozen merry Christmases more, and you will be reading those wonderful conundrums too. As for our elderly folks, we watch the ladies at their sport, and the young people indulging at the branches; and instead of finding bonbons or sweets in the pockets which we pluck off the boughs, we find instead Mr. Carnifex's review of the quarter's meat; Mr. Sartor's compliments, and little statement for Nell; and the young gentlemen, and Madame de Sainte-Crinoline's respects to the young ladies, who in closes her account, and will send on Saturday, please;

or we stretch our hand out to the educational branch of the Christmas tree, and there find a lively and amusing article from the Rev. Henry Holyhead, containing our dear Tommy's exceedingly moderate account for the last term's school expenses.

The tree yet sparkles, I say. I am writing on the

The Doar's Head, from Washington Irving's "Christmas Dinner"



OUR own Washington Irving, in his "Sketch Book," has described an English Christmas dinner party of his own, and more provocatively of a longings for his own, than any of the English writers themselves. How much there is in the dinner, and how much in the writer, it would be hard to say, even after one had exchanged for the bear's head and the "ancient air" of old England the glorious brown turkey of his native land; but this is the way Irving describes it:

occupying the center of the chamber. Along the sides were ranged, low enough for sheep, and built of stones laid in cement. There were no stails or partitions of any kind. Dust and chaff yawned the floor, filled all the cracks and hollows, and thickened the spider webs, which dropped from the ceiling like bits of dirty lines; otherwise the place was clean, and, to appearance, as comfortable as any of the arched taverns of the Khan proper. In fact, a cave was the model, and first suggestion of the tavern.

"Come in!" said the guide. "These piles upon the floor are for travelers like yourselves. Take what of them you need."

"Then he spoke to Mary. "Can you rest here?" "The place is sanctified," she answered.

They [the shepherds] went through the courtyard without notice, although there were some up even then talking about the wonderful light. The door of the cavern was open. A lantern was burning within, and they entered unceremoniously.

"I give you peace," the watchman said to Joseph and the Beth-Israhelites. "Here are people looking for a child born this night, whom they are to find in a manger." For a moment the face of the stolid Nazarene was moved; turning away, he said, "The child is here."

They were led to one of the mangers, and there the child was. The lantern was brought, and the shepherds stood by mate. The little one made no sign; it was as others just born.

"Where is the mother?" asked the watchman. One of the women took the baby and went to Mary, lying near, and put it in her arms. Then the bystanders collected about the two.



Thank her for the turkey. "Here's"—(A slight pecuniary transaction takes place at this juncture, and Bob nods and winks and puts his hand in his waistcoat.) "You have had a pleasant week?" "Bob—'Haven't I?" (An exit, anxious to know the amount of the coin which has just changed hands.)

day before Twelfth day, if you must know it, but already ever so many of the fruits have been pulled, and the Christmas lights have gone out. Bobby Missetow, who has been staying with us for a week (and who has been sleeping mysteriously in the bathroom), comes to say he is going away to spend the rest of the holidays with his grandmother—of I brush away the nearly tear of regret as I part with the dear child. "Well, Bob, goodby, since you will go. Compliments to grandmamma

in these unceremonious days; but a long, courtly, well-worded one of the ancient school. There was now a pause, as if something was expected; when suddenly the butler entered the hall with some degree of bustle; he was attended by a servant on each side with a large waxlight, and bore a silver dish on which was an enormous pig's head, decorated with rosemary, with a lemon to its mouth, which was placed with great formality at the head of the table. The moment this pig's head made its appearance, the harper struck up a flourish; at the conclusion of which the young Oxonian, on receiving a hint from the squire, gave, with an air of the most comic gravity, an old carol, the first verse of which was as follows:

"Caput apri defecit reddens laudes domino. The boar's head in hand bring I, With garlands gay and rosemary. I pray you all enjoy merrily, Qu' estes in convivio."

Hawthorne's Strange Christmas Banquet



IN GRIM and weird contrast with the jovial heartiness of the human Christmas feast which Irving tells of in his "Christmas Banquet" imagined by Nathaniel Hawthorne in his "Mosses from an Old Manse." It is a story within a story, the latter merely the shell which serves to excite and carry a tale of an annual banquet at which the conspicuous guest is Gervaise Hastings, typical of the cold, hard, soulless man of wealth and distinction, known not in New England only, but in old England and, indeed, in all the world. It is, in reality, a kind of morality play, whose moral warns us to keep our hearts warm to others throughout the year, not on occasions when we need them most, we may have no hearts to feel and to enjoy.

In their own way these were as wretched a set of people as ever had assembled at the festivals. There they sat, with the veiled skeleton of the founder holding aloft the cypress wreath at one end of the table, and at the other, wrapped in furs, the withered figure of Gervaise Hastings, stately, calm, and cold, impressing the company with awe, yet so little interesting their sympathy that he might have vanished into thin air without their once-exclaiming, "Whether is he gone?" "Sir," said the philanthropist, addressing the old man, "you have been so long a guest at this annual festival, and have thus been conversant with so many varieties of human affliction, that not improbably you have thence derived some great and important lessons. How blessed were your lot could you reveal a secret by which all this might be reversed?" "I know of but one misfortune," answered Gervaise Hastings, quietly, "and that is my own."

The Converted Scrooge, from "A Christmas Carol," by Dickens

DICKENS, if you recall, did much of the same thing with old Scrooge, but he did not wish to shirk his off into a doubtful eternity but a probable perdition. After Scrooge had his scars with all his ghostly visitors, he became a converted Scrooge, a transformed Scrooge, a Scrooge so human that poor Bob Cratchit thought he must have gone stark mad. For this is how the altered Scrooge behaved:

Scrooge was early at the office next morning. Oh, he was early there. If he could only be there first, and catch Bob Cratchit coming late! That was the thing he had set his heart upon. The clock struck 9. No Bob. A quarter past. No Bob. He was full eighteen minutes and a half behind his time. Scrooge sat with his door wide open, that he might see him come into the tank.

His hat was off before he opened the door; his comfoter, too. He was on his stool in a jiffy; driving away with his pen, as if he were trying to overtake 5 o'clock. "Hallo!" growled Scrooge, in his accustomed voice as near as he could feign it. "What do you mean by coming here at this time of day?" "I am very sorry, sir," said Bob. "I am behind my time."

like to appear overbearing, I asked no questions. I could not, however, but notice a pig, magnificently decorated with peacock's feathers, in imitation of the tail of that bird, which overshadowed a considerable tract of the table. This, the squire confessed, with some little hesitation, was a present pig, though a peacock pig was certainly the most authentic; but there had been such a mortality among the peacocks this season that he could not prevail upon himself to have one killed.

When the clock was rung, the butler brought in a huge silver vessel of wine and curious workmanship, which he placed before the squire. Its appearance was hailed with acclamation, being the Wassail Bowl, so renowned in Christmas festivity. The contents had been prepared by the squire himself; for it was a beverage, in the skillful mixture of which he particularly prided himself; alleging that it was too absurd and complex for the comprehension of an ordinary servant. It was a potent, indeed, that might well make the heart of a toper leap within him, being composed of the richest and rarest wines, highly spiced and sweetened, with roasted apples bobbing about the surface.

The old gentleman's whole countenance beamed with a serene look of inward delight, as he stirred the mighty bowl. Having raised it to his lips, with a hearty wish of a merry Christmas to all present, he cast it brimming round the board, for every one to follow his example, according to the primitive style, pronouncing it "the ancient foundation of good feeling, where all hearts met together."

There was much laughing and rallying as the honest emblem of Christmas joviality circulated, and was kissed rather coolly by the ladies.



looking back on your serene and prosperous life, how can you claim to be the sole unfortunate of the human race?" "You will not understand it," replied Gervaise Hastings, feebly, and with a singular inflection, in pronunciation, and sometimes putting one word before another. "None have understood it—not even those who experience the like. It is a chilliness—a want of earnestness—a feeling as if what should be my heart were a thing of vapor—a haunting perception of unreality! Thus seeming to possess all that other men have—all that men aim at—I have really possessed nothing, neither joys nor griefs. All things, all persons—as was truly said to me at this table long and long ago—have been like shadows flickering on the wall, but not real to me. I have been so with my wife and children—with those who seemed my friends; it is so with yourselves, whom I see now before me. Neither have I myself any real existence, but am a shadow like the things that I see."

"And how is it with your views of a future life?" "Worse than with you," said the old man, in a hollow and feeble tone, "for I cannot conceive it earnestly, and I am full of our hope and reality in the wretchedness! This cold heart—this unreal life! Ah! it grows colder still!" "He chanced that at this juncture the decayed ligaments of the skeleton gave way, and the dried bones fell together in a heap, thus casting the dimly gleam of cypress to drop upon the table. The attention of the company being thus diverted for a single instant from Gervaise Hastings, they recovered, on turning again toward him, that the old man had undergone a change. His shadow had ceased to flicker on the wall.

The Converted Scrooge, from "A Christmas Carol," by Dickens

raise your salary and endeavor to assist your struggling family, and we will discuss your affairs this very afternoon over a Christmas bowl of smoking bishop, Bob! Make up the fires and buy another coal scuttle before you do another I. Bob Cratchit!" Scrooge was better than his word. He did it all, and infinitely more; and to kindest Tiny Tim, who did NOT DIE, he was a second father. He became as good a friend, as good a master, and as good a man as the good old city knew, or any other good city, town or borough in the good old world. Some people laughed to see the alteration in him, but he let them laugh and he let nothing happen on this globe, for good, at which some people did not have their fill of laughing in the country; and knowing that such as these would be blind anyway, he thought it quite as well that they should wrinkle up their eyes in grins as have the mairaid in less attractive forms. His own heart laughed, and that was quite enough for him.

He had no further intercourse with Spirits, but lived upon the Total Abstinence Principle ever afterwards; and it was always said of him that he knew how to keep Christmas well, if any man alive possessed the knowledge. May that be truly said of us, and all of us! And so, as Tiny Tim observed, God bless Us, Every One.



trophy, on which was a display of plate that might have vied (at least in variety) with Belshazzar's parade of the vessels of the temple: "gagons, cans, cups, beakers, goblets, basins and ewers"; the gorgeous utensils of gold, compassions that gradually accumulated through many generations of jovial housekeepers. Before these stood the two yule candles, beaming like two stars of the first magnitude; other lights were distributed in branches, and the whole array glittered like a firmament of silver.