

Making Christmas Real According to Good Saint Nick



A Basketful of Joy
How We Respond, the Country Over, to the Inspiration of the Patron of the Gifts

OF ALL the legends of good Saint Nicholas that have survived—not in the books, but in the traditions of peoples—the one that is held most dear is that of the simple, good old man, very much of the hermit, who lived many centuries ago and chose the eve of the Saviour's birth to gladden the hearts of poor children and poor people generally in the neighborhood of his hermitage with such simple, useful gifts as he could afford from his savings throughout the year.

An addendum to the story has it that good old Santa Claus, or Nicholas, finding his benefactions growing in their needs beyond his modest means, begged of the richer for the poorer, so that by the time he died he had established quite a custom of Christmas giving, which survives until this very day, and is likely to survive for so many more Christmases that we who follow so numerously in his kindly way will never live to see its end, nor will our children down to uncounted generations.

The Christmas that we make real, the Christmas that we realize is Christmas, in its essence nothing more than that earliest of medieval Christmases, made up of kindly giving.

If any outward and visible sign were needed of the inner and spiritual grace of Christianity, no more impressive evidence could be asked than this of our own modern Christmas, which embodies the very soul of pity, faith and charity.

BROADENING THE DAY
So greatly and so beautifully has the world's Christmas, and notably the Christmas of the American people, broadened, that we have come to consider only that Christmas as ideal and as the due philosophy of a people which leaves no one, for that day at least, in actual hunger, or cold, or stark privation. We respond, the country over, to the inspiration of the ancient legend lingering in our hearts, and we respond more generously, more universally, than any people ever did before us.

Nevertheless it is hard to go far enough back to find a time when some Christmas charity was absent from a Christian land. In England Saint Augustine had barely passed away when the great festival of Christmas was the occasion of generous hospitality to the poor, who were in a fair way of starving, unless their rude and rough monarchs took them in, for food and shelter. So it was through the reigns of the Anglo-Saxons and Danish kings.

sumptuously at Westminster. But the building, as it stood, by no means satisfied his sense of his own grandeur or his ideas of festive prodigality.

Every year that passed with William Rufus on the throne carried the original kindly, pious feast further from the decent conventions which had attended its origin as a celebration of the birth of the Saviour of all mankind, poor as well as rich. Rufus himself, of a character gross and licentious, was prone to excesses that had all the abandoned viciousness of decadent Rome, without the lingering traces of artistic culture which at least rescued them from the complete banality of the half-civilized British.

It was Rufus who, in the latter part of his reign, reared the spacious hall at Westminster, the scene of so many royal Christmases in the centuries that followed; the great place of roasting, which those who happened to remember their Pope will recall as "Rufus's roasting hall," and the second heightened the walls and added the famous roof of carved English oak, and although it was shrouded in its earlier proportions by Sir Charles Barry when he adapted it to the purposes of a vestibule of the new houses of parliament, it has remained an imposing monument to the tumultuous feasts in which the old-time monarchs indulged.

Rufus himself was far from satisfied with it. One of his courtiers remarked to him that it was too large for its purpose.

"This hall," responded the aspiring Rufus, "is not large enough by one-half, and is but a bedchamber in comparison of that I have mind to make."

But for hundreds of years it was the greatest of its kind in Europe, and the Christmas feasts that were held in it were destined to be traditions of huge hospitality, such as the assemblages to come could only sigh for, but never bid return.

Those festivities, however, were distinct with the Christmas spirit which bids us eat our Christmas turkey behind locked doors and admit only those of our friends and creditors we need for the rest of the

year in our business. In essence, they were selfishness, when contrasted with the spirit that embraces all mankind, poor as well as rich. Rufus himself, of a character gross and licentious, was prone to excesses that had all the abandoned viciousness of decadent Rome, without the lingering traces of artistic culture which at least rescued them from the complete banality of the half-civilized British.

They took on more of the selfish aspect as the centuries rolled on, for the world itself was crystallizing from the approximate democracy of barbarism into the hard cruelty of feudalism and vassalage. Yet still another change was to ensue before real democracy, born amid the thunders of revolution and sweeping onward through a century to the marvelous changes of the era we live in now, should give every man, noble and vulgar, the right to a Christmas of his own—and what has proved of vastly greater use to him, the vested claim to possession of himself and his laws, by which he can procure the means of enjoying it.

FESTIVALS BECAME BANQUETS
In later centuries the Christmas festival of the kings became magnificent banquets, at which the nobles had the benefit of their liege's hospitality and the commons had to take care of themselves—which the commons managed to do.

There are nobles of England who maintain the traditions of the really charitable Christmas, as understood by nobility toward tenants. Thus, an account of the duke of Rutland's Christmas liberality some years ago at Belvoir Castle.

The usual Christmas gifts were given to the poor of Kington, Woolthorpe and Redmire—nearly 200 in number—consisting of calico, flannel dresses, stockings and handkerchiefs, each person at the same time receiving a loaf of bread and a pint of ale. Twenty-

one bales of goods, containing counterpane, blankets and sheets, were also sent to the clergy of as many different villages for distribution amongst the poor. The servants of the castle and workmen of the establishment had their Christmas dinner, tea, and supper, the servants' hall having been beautifully decorated. At one end of the room was a coronet with the letter H; and at the opposite end three coronets, with the 'peacock in pride,' being the crest of the Rutland family. The following mottoes, in large letters, were conspicuous: "Long Live the Duke of Rutland," "Long Live Lord and Lady John Manser and Family," and "Merry Christmas to You All." All present thoroughly enjoyed themselves, as it was the wish of his grace they should do.

The Christmas waits long ago in England made the tradition of Yuletide hospitality to wandering minstrels, these open sesame to all doors in claim of Christmas largesse—cakes and comfits, a share of the wassail, whatever hall or cottage could afford for the night. In the United States the eastern cities still have groups of children who perpetuate the custom, and only a generation ago, in Philadelphia, the numbers made New Year's eve a Christmas waits' harvest as universal as ever it had been in England.

Amid all these growths of custom the charity which begins at home had scrupulously minded its own affairs, and the practice of exchanging Christmas gifts grew among those whose prosperity and station were about equal, while the charming myth of Santa Claus took care of the eager demands of the children, that they be remembered with the toys and sweets that are as much their urgent needs to happiness as more solid food and calmer comfort are to their elders.

This country, taking over the whole Anglo-Saxon inheritance of lore and custom, at a time when charity was as crude as it was spontaneous, had also the imperious need of the pioneer community, a universal necessity for help in times of scarcity, trouble and suffering.

The Missionary is as Happy as the Children

She Got What She Wanted

Christmas, By Tommy

I'M GLAD that Christmas doesn't come in June, because the leggings, skates and sled and things.
That Santa Claus will give me when he comes, Among the other presents that he brings, Would be no good at all in summer time.
I wrote a note to tell him what I'd like, Just so he wouldn't have to stop and think, Or maybe just forget and bring a bike.
My cousin Frank has just been telling me, There never was a Santa Claus at all, But when I asked my ma she only said, She'd noticed that he never failed to call At our house every single Christmas eve,

And so we shouldn't let it worry us, So long as he kept coming once a year.
I guess Frank only tried to make a fuss, Last year I thought I'd stay awake and peep At Santa Claus, and maybe talk to him A little, just to ask him where he gets So many things, and why his track's so dim Upon the snow, and what he rides in when There isn't any snow on Christmas eve; And where he goes and stays all through the year, And how he figures out just what to leave.
I didn't go to sleep the longest time, Until my eyes kept going shut themselves,

And then I heard a little rattly sound, Just like when mice are on the pantry shelves, And I woke up and slid out, awful still, So's not to make a noise and scare my ma.
But Santa Claus had left the things and went, There wasn't any one downstairs but pa.
I hope there'll always be a Santa Claus, Because there always will be girls and boys To hang their stockings up on Christmas eve For him to fill with candy, nuts and toys; And if he doesn't come, their hearts will ache, My ma says looking for him's no disgrace, And I know I will never get too big To hang my stocking by the chimney place.

"Christmas gift," in the south, as it is asked by many negroes and some children, lives with us as a heritage of the genuine baronial days that preceded the emancipation, when the slave, like the serf or vassal of the civilization we are heirs to, could appeal to the ruling class for dole in the Yuletide season. But the common interdependence of the whole people, in all sections, extended Christmas giving and left to the recipients only the misfortune of need, not the odium of subservience.

So our Christmas has developed into a festival time when every man and woman feels that the hunger of the poor, the cold and wretchedness of the poor, are not something far off and removed, as might be some shivering wretch at the door of the great hall of a monarch, or some stranger who accepts property in the distant name of Father Adam. The land that has nearly a million people in it, suddenly deigned from all the world as though Niagara were pouring humanity exuberantly into its capacious lap, has remained the land whose millions feel the responsive thrill of brotherhood, and answer to it.

And that is a marvelous thing to have achieved, amid the unflinching, onward rush of a nation whose both hands have been full of desperately eager labor and—its critics are to be believed—of equally desperately self-aggrandizement.

For if Americans are rich—and rich they are by comparison, man for man and possessions for possessions, with the rest of the world—there are few of them who escape the human feeling that their enough is too little for their wants. The competitors they expect are larger than those of other peoples, the inadequacies they strive to supply are as hardly felt as the lack elsewhere. So their impulse to Christmas charity—to the making of a Christmas as real as the ancient one of Santa Claus in the sense of generosity to the poor—carries the same handicap; in under the same restraints, as though their sufficiency were that of Germany or France or England; and as though their poor were as necessitous.

GIVING A NATIONAL TRAIT
But the extent of their giving is bounded only by the national limits. The universal custom of exchange of gifts can well be omitted from any consideration of the real Christmas spirit of charity; the very phrases that has grown up about it in the last few years, expressing the fact that it is an exchange, limits it to friendliness and good will among people of equal position.

The good bishop of Myra, like the good spirit of tradition, had no such thought of reward; posterity's gratitude for what they did for the ignorant children and the needy poor does not do them the honor of believing that they possibly didn't do much as think of any reward in heaven. They were just simple, kindly, loving souls who saw suffering about them and tried to make their little world happier and better because they liked to see goodness, wisdom and happiness.

The city missionaries, who appeal to us for the clothing we can spare to warm cold bodies; the Salvation Army King Kings and leaders, who brave chill and reeking dampness to coax coins from the passing multitudes; the countless Christmas charity workers, who importune stranger and friend for contributions to their funds—all these, and there are thousands of them, are realizing in the deed and the spirit the ideal of Christmas—Christian charity that was set up by the first Saint Nicholas of Santa's of blessed memory. Where there were one or two such Santas in those earlier days, their names are legion now, and they are the first who would laugh if any one were to surmise that, in their turn, they were earning beatification.

But their appeals and their truly arduous labors would come to naught if the great masses of the people did not respond as they do, the real Christmas can be made only by the generosity of a whole community, with some to ask and millions more to give.

The scriptures tell the story of the first Christmas gift in that imposing legend of the three kings bearing tribute to the infant savior, who, by the way, happened to be just about as poverty stricken as any newborn baby that ever came into a chilly, inhospitable world. Perhaps Saint Nicholas looked upon his protégés as the living regressions from the past; the hapless child he served so zealously; and many of the Christmas gift articles of faith, among many European peoples, that whoever gives to the poor on Christmas gives to the savior of mankind.

Here, with a national rush of Christmas appeals for charity and a national response, we scarcely recall or know the legends of the earlier customs. We simply hurry along, and give hugely in passing, somehow, we don't pay any attention either to the asking or the giving now. That is because we are so familiar with St. Nick we will do no harm, European peoples, that whoever gives to the poor, we notice that in the United States, the real, original Christmas is a universal thing, with nobody in particular taking any credit for it, because everybody, in general is concerned in it.

For see, American-like, we've just syndicated Christmas; that's all.