

# CHRISTMAS IN THE GOLDEN TIME

With Good Cheer and Revelry, Lordly Wassailing and Antic Mummery, Merrie England observed the Joyous Yule Festival.

The Lord of Misrule



The Waits put forth their Melody

No festival of the whole year is so generally honored as Christmas, and the reason of its general observance here has crept into it so many customs and practices that it is almost lost as any one's ability to catalogue them. There is no other festival, perhaps, so old, and yet so ever new, as the Yule clog or log. The custom of singing carols formed an important part of the day's celebration under the Saxon kings, and the mince pies are believed to have been a remnant of cakes consumed at the Roman winter sports, always held at this time of the year. In order to do no violence to the customs of the people, the primitive Church selected the time of the Roman Saturnalia for its Christmas celebration. Almost any time of the year might have been selected, for there is no authority for Dec. 25 as the date of Christ's birth.

In the Middle Ages.

While the yule log was burned on the hearth upon Christmas eve, and maids were kissed under mistletoe in the dark ages, Christmas was still a religious festival. In order to make it attractive to the people, and so to instruct them in the Bible stories, plays were produced with great splendor in many a great cathedral. As the liturgy of the church was in Latin, so, too, were the Christmas plays, but they were easily understood by the people, for even if the words escaped them the costume and the action conveyed a deep meaning. As a rule, there was little literary merit in the plays, having been written with the sole idea of conveying instruction in a pleasing manner, and often containing farcical scenes, which one may well believe were well received by the crowds that filled the cathedrals at Christmas time. Two of the earliest Christmas plays that have come down to us are to be found in the few fragmentary works of Hilarius, a monk of the twelfth century, who is said to have been an Englishman, and who is known to have been a pupil of the great Abelard. Of the three mystery plays which he is thought to have written in collaboration with Jordanus and mon, probably brother monks, two were evidently played during the Christmas season, namely, "The Image of St. Nicholas," most likely produced on that saint's day, Dec. 6, and



"Hear Come I Old Father Christmas"

"The History of Daniel," which seems to have been intended for Christmas presentation.

"The Image of St. Nicholas" shows more

real dramatic ability in its construction than these early productions usually do, for, while its plot is not complicated, there is undoubtedly a plot. In brief, the story is as follows: An actor, representing an image of St. Nicholas stands in a shrine and discovers half a dozen robbers, who have stolen a treasure box which had been hidden in the shrine for safe keeping by a barbarian. The latter returns, and, finding his treasure gone, bewails his loss, and, whipping the image, demands the return of the goods. The image then goes to the robbers, and telling them that they will not thrive with the stolen goods, they give up the treasure to its owner. The latter, out of gratitude, kneels to the image and adores it, but the saint then appears to him and bids him to worship God alone and praise only the name of Christ. The barbarian is then converted and closes the piece with adoration.

"The History of Daniel."

"The History of Daniel" is a piece in two acts, and was, no doubt, produced with considerable spectacular effect for the time. In the first act we are shown Belshazzar's Feast, and in the second, which deals with Darius, King of the Medes and Persians, we are shown Daniel denounced and sent to the den of lions. At Daniel's prayer "there shall appear an angel of the Lord in the den, having a sword, who shuts the mouth of the lions." Darius, finding Daniel saved, puts the latter's envious accusers in his place and leads Daniel to his throne, ordering the people to adore the true God. Daniel then delivers a version in rhyme of the prophecy (chap. vii., 13-14) of the coming of the Son of Man, and to close the play another angel appears, singing, "Behold, I bring you good tidings of great joy," etc., "which being finished," continues what might be called the stage directions, "if it was done at matins, Darius begin 'Te Deum Laudamus,' but if at vespers, 'Magnificat Anima Mea Dominum.'"

"The Slaughter of the Innocents."

Another early Christmas play has been found in an old Orleans manuscript. It has for its subject, "The Slaughter of the Innocents," and was no doubt, frequently played during the Middle Ages in one or another French cathedral. In France and on the continent generally the plays produced were usually the effort of a local learned doctor, although at times copies of popular dramas were made for use by neighboring towns. In the play just noted (Interfectio Puerorum) the part of the innocents was taken by the choir boys, and the other characters, including the women, were represented by monks. In one part of the church was erected a manger; in another a throne for Herod. A distant corner was supposed to represent Egypt, and for fear these

distinctions might not be apparent to the beholders, signs were hung over these crude pieces of scenery bearing the names of the places represented. Like most of the mystery plays, the story is briefly told and numerous anthems are interpolated for the benefit of the chorists.

"Wakefield Shepherds' Play."

Toward the end of the play the boys (the innocents having arisen from the dead) go into the choir; Herod's throne is then taken by an actor, who represents Archelaus; an angel bids the Holy Family to return from Egypt, and then the preceptor begins the "Te Deum," and so the performance ends.

Some of the finest comic touches to be found in these old religious plays are to be found in the Wakefield Shepherds' play, written about the year 1400.

The first scene opens with three shepherds watching their flocks, all of them complaining of the cold night. A character called Mak takes part in their rude sport, and upon opportunity steals a sheep. Mak's theft is subsequently discovered, and he is soundly thrashed, a piece of "business" which was certain to arouse laughter in a medieval audience, for it seldom fails to amuse a modern one. There are certain parts of this comic scene that would be considered too broad nowadays, but it must be understood that at this time the plays had passed out of the church, and were now acted on the movable platforms in the public streets. This frolic is followed by the serious scene. An angel appears, singing the "Gloria," after which he announces that Christ is born at Bethlehem.

So the shepherds go to Bethlehem and make such presents to the Holy Child as lie within their powers. One presents a "bob of cherries," another a bird and the other a tennis ball.

"Acts of the Apostles."

During the reign of Francis I. in France, the presentation of a grand mystery of the "Acts of the Apostles," given during the Christmas season, was made the occasion of a spectacular proclamation in Paris. In an account of this procession around the different quarters of the French capital, which is found in a rare little tract published in Paris in 1541, we learn that the procession started out at 8 o'clock on the morning of Dec. 16, attended by "officers of justice, plebeians and others having the regulation of these rhetoricians and gentlemen of the long robe, as well as of the short." They were preceded by trumpeters and the mayor's archers and at every crossway or public place repeated the proclamation in the King's name. The day fixed for the performance was the feast of St. Stephen, Dec. 26. The proclamation called upon the people "who wished to do so" to take part and to attend rehearsals at the hall of the Passion.

These rehearsals were continued from day to day until the performance was considered perfect. The piece was played in the Hotel de Flandres. The same year the managers of the Mystery were haled into court for

employing "mean, illiterate fellows to act, who were not cunning in these matters," and for lengthening out the performances by introducing apocryphal matters. When it was known that this action on the part of the "undertakers" of the Mystery had made the performance last from 8 or 9 o'clock in the morning until 5 o'clock in the afternoon, the trial will appear to have been a perfectly just proceeding. By these tactics also the Mystery was made to continue for over six months, to the demoralization of the Church and business interests of the town.

Under the Stuarts.

Christmas masques, mere excuses for gentlemen and ladies of the court to attire themselves in fantastic, gorgeous or bizarre costumes, were long popular in Italy and in France, and Henry VIII., having paid a visit to the

for the year 1699, nearly a century later, cost £4,215.

These masques, or disguisings, were participated in by the ladies and gentlemen of the court; in fact, we find James' queen, Anne of Denmark, appearing with her ivory skin blackened to represent a negress from the Niger. The young Prince Charles, afterward the ill-fated King Charles I., also took part in these Christmas festivities, as did also the Princess Elizabeth and Prince Henry.

The Twelfth Night Revels.

Twelfth Night was the usual time for these Christmas revels at Whitehall, and, in fact, had been for centuries at the English court. Although Henry VIII. is credited with having adopted the old Italian custom, as early as Edward III.'s time we heard of ludi, or plays, exhibited at court in the Christmas holidays. In 1348, when Edward kept his Christmas at his castle at Guildford, the dresses for the maskers consisted of buckram tunics of various colors, masks of different similitudes, namely, faces of women and men, heads of angels, "made of silver," and mantles embroidered with heads of dragons, peacocks and swans. It is not known that the entertainment consisted of anything beyond the most primitive kind of pantomime and posturing, and it is very doubtful if they even suggested the drama as we know it.

No court entertainments in England that had gone before equaled in magnificence the masques written by Johnson and designed by Inigo Jones, which made the holidays an annual pleasure to James I. and his queen. King James, notwithstanding the fact his name is inseparably linked with the choicest English version of the Bible, was given to luxurious pleasures, and his young queen, Anne, had the reputation of being a most graceful dancer at a time when dancing was regarded as one of the fine arts.

Christmas Masques at Whitehall.

King James loved pleasure and Queen Anne nearly made a bankrupt of him to pay her jewelers. She loved progresses, as they were called, and in one of her royal visits to Bristol spent \$150,000 on a costly presentation of a masque. From this it may be imagined that the Christmas masques held at Whitehall, where the king then lived, must have cost an enormous outlay, in fact, it is known that one cost \$22,000. Ben Jonson wrote twenty-nine masques for his king, most of them being produced at Christmas.

In the times of the Stuarts Christmas was not only observed at court, but those old customs which were ancient even then were followed throughout England, wherever there was a castle or house of well-to-do people. Christmas festivities were enjoyed by the poorer people; in fact, it was intended that they should get much entertainment from them, but it was the rich who footed the bill, and they were usually very cheerful about it, too.

The Christmas season usually began on Dec. 15 and lasted until Jan. 6, although in Elizabeth's day the season had been known to last for full six weeks or until Shrove Tuesday, heralding the coming of Lent, put a stop to the merrymakings.

The Lord of Misrule.

Anciently Christmas observances included the reign of the Lord of Misrule or the Abbot of Unreason, James I., according to tradition, having on one occasion hid his crown under the abbot's hood. There were gambols by the students under the guide of the Lord of Misrule, plays in the vari-

ety of ill luck. The brand left of it was the next day taken up and saved to light the next year's log. While the log continued burning there was drinking, eating and telling of strange tales. Even the lowly sometimes had a yule log on their hearth of a Christmas eve, and, while generally the blazing fire was considered sufficient for illuminating purposes in the halls of the great castles were burned as well. On Christmas eve the waits and carol singers played under windows until the generosity of the householders was aroused.

On Christmas day, in the morning, all went to church, dressed in their best. The vicar preached the best sermon of the year, and the choir, from long practice, led the singing with Christmas spirit. This service the day. Henceforth the day was given up to festivities.

In those days, even as in these, eating and drinking were the principal means of enjoyment. Christmas in England seemed to have been designed to suit palates and to test capacities. The requisites for good Christmas fare were plenty of good drink, a blazing fire in the hall, pudding, mustard with a sirloin of beef, shred or minced pies, goose, capon, turkey, cheese, apples and nuts, to say nothing of carols with which this great procession of edibles led.

To the Victorian Era.

A growing body of the people in these days took no part in the merriment of Christmas; in fact, their long-drawn faces, sour looking all the year, were almost unbearable at the season of joy. Alarmed at the goings-on at court, mortified at the licentiousness of the ruling class, they vowed worldly joy was a detestable thing. Life to them was a stern existence. Even in Elizabeth's time these Puritans had begun their protests against Christmas celebrations, and against royal pageants, and in the time of James I. their voice grew so loud that they were caricatured in some of the masques at court. They continued, these stern old roundheads, to grow in number and in power, and, having made an end of King Charles I. in a most effectual manner, put their ban on everything that England loved most, including Christmas.

Under the Commonwealth they stopped the decoration of churches at Christmas, and sent a crier about London with a proclamation to the effect that "Christmas day and all other superstitious festivals should be put down and that a market should be kept upon Christmas day." Persons who insisted upon attending church on Christmas day were immediately arrested. As for the Lord of Misrule and Father Christmas they were banished, and the Parliament by its own act crossed Christmas off the calendar. For ten long years England, so closely allied with the observance of Christmas, was throttled, but Christmas was only in exile; he returned with the royal family when the Restoration was accomplished.

The Passing of Old Customs.

The days of the last of the Georges saw the departure of many time-honored Christmas customs in England, and the arrival of some new ones. The singing of carols was one of the first to go, and later in the century the waits disappeared, although a few stragglers now and then annoy Londoners in the Christmas season, until a bobby tells them to move on.

Some of the old etchings by Seymour, the first illustrator of Pickwick, which are reproduced on this page,



Bringing in the Yule Log

neighboring realm, imported them into England.

During the reign of Elizabeth masques, the work of poets, and in the form we now know them, came into prominence, and the greatest writer of these pleasant but trivial entertainments was Ben Jonson, who wrote about three dozen during the reigns of James I. and Charles I.

These were sumptuous spectacular entertainments, in which the celebrated architect, Inigo Jones, was employed to devise "the machinery," or scenery, which was certainly more elaborate in those days than had yet been attempted upon the professional stage. While the first Christmas kept by Henry VIII. cost £284 12s. 7d. for "disguisings," the masques of James

ous universities, schools and by the benches of the temple. There were the visits of mummers, who, much like our New Year's shooters, disguised themselves. They went from house to house and recited a play, usually the play of St. George, on the 21st of December, St. Thomas' day. One of the chief figures of the mumming was old Father Christmas, who was for centuries the Santa Claus of England, although it was never believed he did anything but represent the spirit of the season.

Burning of the Yule Log.

On Christmas eve the yule log was dragged into the baronial halls in the country, put in the great gaping fireplace, and ignited with the well-saved remnant of the preceding year's log. Its duty was to burn all night;

give a spirited idea of how old Christmas was observed in England in the early days of Victoria's reign, when the spirit of the season was still alive and modern ideas had not yet shoved the old customs aside.

Superstition About Dreams.

A curious old superstition is that nine holly leaves tied in a handkerchief with nine knots and placed under the pillow on Christmas night will cause the sleeper to dream of his or her future wife or husband.

There is an old superstition that to be born on Christmas day is to be lucky all one's life, and in Shropshire there is a belief that a boy born on Christmas day must be brought up a lawyer or he will become a thief.