THE STRANGE WAYS OF MAN

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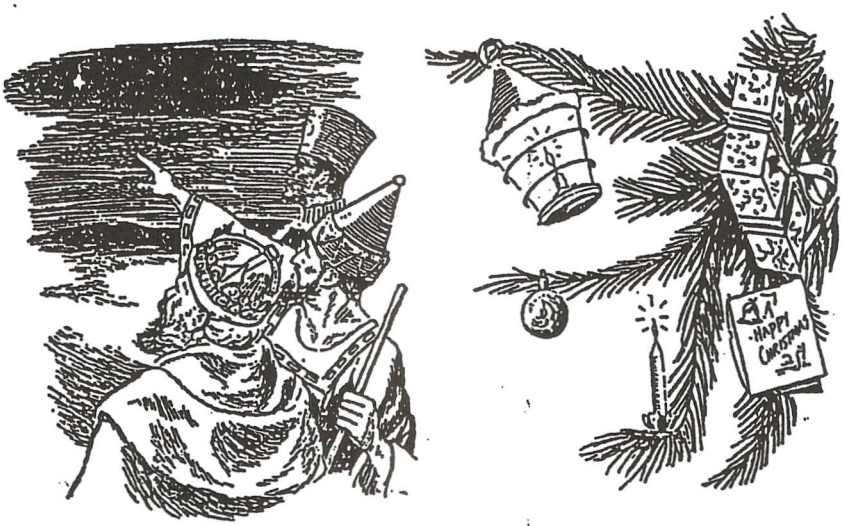
CHAPTER 21
"CHRISTMAS CHEER"

NOTE: A SECULAR NON-RELIGIOUS WORK, STRICTLY A BOOK OF CUSTOMS WITH NO RELIGIOUS LEANINGS.

Chapter 21



CHRISTMAS CHEER

CHRISTMAS ... Turkey and plum-pudding and mince-pies; cards dropping through the letter-box by the dozen; letters and packages and parcels, done up in fancy paper with coloured string; the Christmas tree glittering with lights and loaded with toys and sweetmeats; children lying awake, listening for the sounds of Father Christmas driving through the air in his reindeer sledge and coming down the chimney with a bulging sack; crackers being pulled, chestnuts popping on the hob, giggling kisses under the mistletoe; carol-singers grouped round the lamp-post in the cold and frosty evening—or, just as likely, the foggy damp.

For most people these are some of the things that spell the magic word, Christmas; and it may be noticed that, although Christmas is one of the great festivals of the Christian Year, there is nothing specifically Christian about any of them. But this is not so surprising as it may appear at first, since Christmas was

being celebrated ages before "there was born this day in the city of David a Saviour, which is Christ the Lord".

The word itself is obviously Christian, meaning the day on which a mass or other religious service is celebrated in honour of the Nativity of Christ. The year of Christ's birth is unknown, and we are equally ignorant of the actual day. But the statement in St. Luke's gospel that at the time "there were shepherds abiding in the field, keeping watch over their flock by night", makes it seem most improbable that the Nativity could have occurred on the night of 25 December, for this would have been at the height of the rainy season in Judaea, when man and beast would have been under cover.

Similar uncertainty surrounds the date of the first institution of Christmas as a Christian festival. So far as our evidence goes, the early Christians did not celebrate Christmas, and the first certain traces of it are found about the time of the Emperor Commodus, towards the close of the second century. Nearly a hundred years later, in the reign of Diocletian, when that Roman emperor was keeping court at Nicomedia, it was reported to him that a multitude of Christians were assembled in the city to celebrate the birthday of Jesus, whereupon he gave orders that the doors of the church in which they were gathered together should be shut and the place set on fire, and numbers of the unhappy worshippers perished in the flames. Later still, St. Chrysostom (died A.D. 407) wrote in his *Homilies* that "On this day (i.e., 25 December) the birthday of Christ was lately fixed at Rome, in order that while the heathens were occupied in their profane ceremonies the Christians might perform their holy rites undisturbed."

The "profane ceremonies" referred to were those held in connexion with the worship of Mithras, the Persian Sun-God, whose worship had risen to great prominence and popularity in the Roman world. Mithras's birthday was celebrated on 25 December, which was the winter-solstice festival in the Roman calendar, and the day was given the name of *Dies Natalis Solis invicti*, "Birthday of the Unconquered Sun". St. Chrysostom saw nothing inappropriate in selecting this particular day as the one on which the Nativity of Christ should be celebrated—quite the contrary, in fact, as is shown by the continuation of the quotation

just given: "They call this day 'the Birthday of the Invincible One,' but who is so invincible as the Lord that overthrew and vanquished Death? They also style it the 'Birthday of the Sun' —and Christ is the Sun of Righteousness." Thus the date of the Nativity, which the Gospels say nothing about, was fixed upon by the Christian Church through a reference to mythological analogy.

But long before Mithras conquered so many Roman hearts and minds, this particular week in December was the occasion for much pagan merrymaking. On 17 December fell the festival of Saturn, one of the most important gods of the Romans, but in popular usage the celebrations extended over seven days. The time was one of general jollity and mirth. During the festival all work was suspended, schools were closed, people gave presents to one another, in particular wax tapers or candles and dolls for the children; they entertained one another and amused themselves with social games, such as gambling for nuts, a symbol of fruitfulness. No punishments were inflicted. Every freedom was accorded to slaves, who were given seats at the banquet and were served by their masters, in remembrance of the rule that there were no differences of social rank in that mythical golden age when Saturnus had been the ruler of mankind. Very clearly, it is to the Roman Saturnalia that we must look for the origin of many of the social customs that crowd about our Christmas season.

Another source, equally pagan but nearer home, is the rites and superstitions of the peoples of northern Europe, with whom our Anglo-Saxon forefathers had close racial and cultural and religious ties. The winter solstice was of very special interest and importance to them, since in these northern parts winter is so dark and drear, the cold so bitter, the winds so sharp. And moreover, the season was so long, that there were many among those simple-minded folk who wondered whether it would ever come to an end and the spring come back again. But out of the accumulated experiences of untold generations they had come to realize that about this particular time in December there came a change in the seasonal round. The days which had been getting shorter now began to lengthen. Clearly the sun was winning in his perennial struggle with the powers of darkness, and with that realization they cheered up wonderfully.

For twelve days and nights at this time of the year the heathen peoples of northern Europe feasted and revelled and indulged in every form of licence, rejoicing that the dark days were coming to an end and that erelong the springtime would be back again. The name given to this period in the Old Norse tongue was *jol*, which became adopted into English as *Yule*. The name is still sometimes applied to the Christmas season, and we may speak of the Yule Log, the massive piece of forest timber that was dragged out of the forest and deposited on the hearth in the great hall to give warmth and sparkle to the wassailing throng. That word, too, comes down to us from Anglo-Saxon times, for *wassail* comes from the Old Norse *ves heill*, meaning "be in health", which was the toast or form of pledge used at the festive board.

Thus it will be seen that Roman paganism and Norse heathenism have both made their contribution to our Christmas usages, furnishing ingredients for the Christmas cake of custom. But there are yet other ingredients which derive from various sources, both religious and secular.

Take "Father Christmas", for instance—the Santa Claus who, so some guileless parents strive to convince their not-so-gullible youngsters, comes down the chimney and fills their stockings with good things. One might have supposed that this jovially rotund figure, dressed in red robes and with white beard descending to his waist and carrying a sack filled to overflowing, has come down to us from the folk-lore of ancient times. Seemingly there *was* a Father Christmas of sorts in the mummers' plays that were performed in the Middle Ages at this season of the year, but he had little in common with our Santa. And Santa Claus did not reach us driving his reindeer-sledge over the snows, but he came across the Atlantic in a grimy, smoke-puffing steamer.

"Santa Claus" is an American corruption of the Dutch Sante Klaas (for Saint Nikolas). And who was this Saint Nicholas? According to Christian legend, he was bishop of Myra, in southern Asia Minor, in the time of the Emperor Diocletian, and some very strange tales are told about him, two in particular. The first tells that there was living in the town of Patara a gentleman who had fallen on evil days, and so was unable to provide his three daughters with suitable marriage-portions. The girls were about

to embark upon a life of shame to keep themselves and their father from starving, when their plight came to the knowledge of St. Nicholas, whose father had recently died and left him a large fortune. Filling a bag with gold, Nicholas went to the man's house by night, and surreptitiously dropped it through the window. Next day the father found the gold, thanked God, and provided for one of his daughters. When Nicholas heard how his plan had succeeded, he repeated the performance, and the second daughter was happily married. Now it was the turn of the third girl, and this time the father decided to keep watch and discover if possible who was his benefactor. Just as the saint was about to throw the third bag through the window, the father seized hold of his robe, and with many tears thanked him for his generosity. Nicholas bade him keep the matter secret, but his identity leaked out, and when he was recognized as a saint it was held that young virgins were specially under his protection.

To this incident in the saint's career has been traced the custom of parents on the eve of St. Nicholas's Day (6 December) to place sweets and other small gifts in their children's shoes and stockings, and pretending that these had been brought by St. Nicholas.

The second story is even more remarkable. Two young men who were passing through Myra on their way to pursue their studies in Athens were murdered by the innkeeper, who, after cutting up their bodies, placed the mutilated remains in a pickling-tub along with some pork. But St. Nicholas was informed in a dream of the horrid transaction. Going to the inn in the morning, he confronted the innkeeper and forced him to confess his crime. Then the saint went to the tub in which the bits and pieces of the murdered youths were, made the sign of the cross over it and said a prayer—and, lo and behold, the mangled bodies were made whole again and the two youths were brought back to life and threw themselves at the feet of their benefactor! After this, it was surely not more than his due that St. Nicholas was hailed as the patron saint of children.

In Germany and Holland and elsewhere on the Continent, little children who had been "good" were assembled on his "day" and were rewarded with sweets, nuts, and other small presents. When the Dutch settled in New York (or New Amsterdam, as it was

first named) they took this pleasant custom with them, and at some unascertainable date it was transferred to Christmas—very likely, as has been suggested, because parents and friends found it too expensive to give the youngsters presents twice in the same month. And so popular did Santa Claus become that in the early part of the last century he made the trip from New York to England.

The Christmas Tree is another importation from abroad, and not so long ago either. There is a pretty little story told about it, that it was originally "thought up" by Martin Luther in the early years of the sixteenth century. One Christmas Eve he was walking in the country, and the sight of the fir trees sparkling in the moonlight so reminded him of the Shepherds' Watch in the fields at Bethlehem that on returning home he tried to reconstruct the scene with a fir sapling on which he hung little candles to represent the stars. But it is said that the pagan German tribes in the Black Forest had some such custom in their celebrations at the winter solstice, and that this had continued down the centuries right up to Luther's day. From Germany the Christmas Tree spread to other lands, and in England we first meet with it in 1829, when the Princess Lieven, wife of the German ambassador in London, is said to have had one in her country house.

But it was immediately after the marriage of the young Queen Victoria to Prince Albert of Saxe-Coburg in 1840 that the Christmas Tree became established as an essential part of the British Christmas. Albert brought the custom with him from Germany, and every year the newspapers and magazines carried charming accounts and pictures of the Tree at Windsor that was prepared for the children of the prolific "Vicky". As *The Illustrated London News* stated in 1848, "The tree employed for this festive purpose is a young fir of about eight feet high, and has six tiers of branches. On each tier or branch are arranged a dozen wax tapers. Pendant from the branches are elegant trays, baskets, *bonbonnières*, and othe receptacles for sweetmeats of the most varied and expensive kind; and of all forms, colours, and degrees of beauty. Fancy cakes, gilt gingerbread and eggs filled with sweetmeats, are also suspended by variously-coloured ribbons from the branches. The tree, which stands upon a table covered with white damask, is supported at the root by piles of sweets of

a larger kind, and by toys and dolls of all descriptions. . . ." This Christmas tree, "prepared by her Majesty's command for the Royal children", was the ancestor of the trees which at Christmas-time are to be found in every home, of all classes, and in almost every land.

The Christmas cracker is supposed to have originated in France, although the first *bon-bons* did not crack or bang; they resembled the modern cracker in shape and contents—sweets, paper-hats, small presents, mottoes, etc.—but they did not "crack": the addition of a small dash of explosive to give the bang was a later development.

Coming now to the custom of sending Christmas-cards, here we have something which has not the slightest connexion with either Christianity or the pagan religions of antiquity. It could not come into widespread use until the introduction of cheap postage in 1840, and it would seem (although there has been much controversy over the point) that the first Christmas-card dates from 1843, when an artist named John Calcott Horseley adopted an idea suggested to him by Henry (later Sir Henry) Cole and designed a card bearing the words, "A Merry Christmas and a Happy New Year to you", surrounded by drawings showing a convivial family party and persons engaged in acts of benevolence to the poor and needy. Copies of this were printed by lithography, coloured by hand, and put on sale at a shilling a time.

The idea was rather slow in catching on, for the second card produced does not seem to have been earlier than 1848, the designer being W. M. Egley. But in 1870 it was decided that Christmas-cards could be sent at half the charge for letters, and before long cards were being put on sale by drapers, toy-shops and tobacconists, as well as by the stationers and booksellers as heretofore. So the Christmas-card was launched on the full tide of success, and nowadays their sales amount to hundreds of millions. Above everything else, the Christmas-card is blamed for that "commercialization of Christmas" which has turned it into "nothing better than a ramp"—a complaint which is echoed by none more loudly or more often than those who have themselves made a not inconsiderable addition to the weight of the postman's bag.

Two other features of Christmas may be mentioned. First, carol-singing. The etymology of "carol" is obscure. The earliest meaning seems to have been a round-dance, a ring-dance; thence it came to mean the song accompanying the dance, and so to the hymn of joy sung at Christmas in honour of Christ's Nativity. The custom of singing carols at Christmas is a very ancient one in the Christian Church. The famous Anglican divine, Jeremy Taylor, maintained "That as soon as these blessed choristers (i.e., the angels on the plains of Bethlehem) had sung their *Christmas Carol*, and taught the Church a hymn to be put in her offices for ever in the anniversary of this festivity, the angels returned into Heaven." Milton, too, in *Paradise Lost*, alludes to the "quire of squadroned angels" who heard this "carol sung". In course of time collections were made of these festive songs or chants intended to be sung at Christmas, and the earliest printed collection was that of Wynkyn de Worde, issued in 1521 from the printing-house in St. Paul's Churchyard, London, where he carried on the business that had been founded by his old master William Caxton.

The Puritans did their best to suppress carol-singing as a Popish or Pagan superstition, but it came back into full favour at the Restoration, although it was the general practice to sing carols as often in the open air as within church walls. In our childhood days it was one of the joys of Christmas to "listen for the waits", these being musicians and singers who gave carol performances in the evening for two or three weeks before Christmas up to Christmas Eve. The name does not derive, as might be supposed, from the "waits" that they made beneath the lamps by whose light they read their scores, but from the fact that the name was first given to watchmen who patrolled the streets at night, sounding their horns to keep marauders away, and shouting out the hour to those who had no alarm-clock beside their bed.

Just as clearly as the carol is Christian, kissing under the mistletoe derives from pagan times. Some authorities trace the custom to the licentious revels of the Roman Saturnalia, and others connect it with the practice of the Druids in ancient Britain. In his account of the kindred tribes in Gaul (France) the Roman author Pliny the Elder (first century A.D.) relates that "the Druids, for

so they call their wizards, esteem nothing more sacred than the mistletoe and the tree on which it grows. It is very rarely met with, but when it is found, they gather it with solemn ceremony. After due preparations have been made for a sacrifice and a feast under the tree, they hail it as the universal healer and bring to the spot two white bulls, whose horns have never been bound before. A priest clad in a white robe climbs the tree and with a golden sickle cuts the mistletoe, which is caught in a white cloth. Then they sacrifice the victims, praying that God may make his own gift to prosper with those upon whom he had bestowed it. They believe that a potion prepared from mistletoe will make barren animals to bring forth, and that the plant is a remedy against all poison."

Nothing about hanging up a mistletoe bough, it will be noticed; but it is generally assumed that the kiss under the mistletoe is, like the practice of throwing rice at weddings, a kind of fertility charm. And most people will not be bothering to inquire too closely into the origin of a custom which has such pleasant possibilities. Here is how it is described by Robert Chambers in that delightful miscellany of antique lore, *The Book of Days*. "A branch of the mystic plant is suspended from the wall or ceiling, and any one of the fair sex, who, either from inadvertence, or, as possibly may be insinuated, on purpose, passes beneath the sacred spray, incurs the penalty of being then and there kissed by any lord of the creation who chooses to avail himself of the privilege."