

CHRISTMAS EVE

Of all nights of the year there is not one that is more anxiously awaited by young people than the night that precedes Christmas. Then begins the great festival of the year; the festival in honour of the birth of Christ; the festival that reminds us of the Child born in a manger, of the shepherds near Bethlehem watching their flocks by night, and of the angels that sang of peace and goodwill to men. It is the most joyous of all holiday seasons; prepared for long before, and remembered pleasantly long afterwards. This is true of England to-day, and it was even more true of the England of the olden times—as you will find if you read Sir Walter Scott's poem of *Marmion*:

"England was merry England, when
Old Christmas brought his sports again.
'Twas Christmas broached the mightiest ale;
'Twas Christmas told the merriest tale;
A Christmas gambol oft would cheer
The poor man's heart through half the year."

At midnight on Christmas Eve the bells are rung, and in Roman Catholic churches the first of the three masses is celebrated,—Christ's masses. But although this is a Christian festival there are curious customs observed which take us back into the old heathen world. There is the miseltoe bough, for instance, which you hang up in the hall; and there is the Yule log. The old Druids had a feast at this season—the time of the winter solstice—when the chief Druid cut the miseltoe from the oak-tree, where it grew, and divided it among the people, who hung it up over their doorways as a charm to bring good-fortune. Then, again, the Yule log is a relic of the ceremony in which the Norsemen lighted great bonfires in honour of their gods. To bring home the Yule log on Christmas Eve is not so common as it used to be, but it deserves to be remembered as one of the most joyous of old English customs.

So, also, are the carols, the waits, the mummers, and the games of Christmas time. Some of these games and mummeries were a little too boisterous for our modern taste, probably because they had their origin in the heathen Saturnalia of old Rome. But we still love to hear the waits tuning up on a clear frosty night, the game of snap-dragon is still a noisy joy, and the carol-singers are still welcome. I am sure you like that old carol which begins:

"God rest you merry, gentlemen,
Let nothing you dismay
For Jesus Christ our Saviour
Was born upon this day
To save us all from Satan's power
When we were gone astray."

But probably the best thing you children like about Christmas Eve is the ceremony of hanging up your stockings in expectation of all the things that are to come to you from the wallet of Santa Claus. That is the great event. Some of you, I believe, try to lie awake until Santa Claus comes with the fruit and the toys. But that is never a success. All the best gifts come to us when we do not peep and watch.

CHRISTMAS DAY

On Christmas Day, in most households, the children are the first to make themselves heard. There are shouts of wonder and glee from the nursery bedrooms when it is discovered that Santa Claus has actually paid his long-talked-about visit, and that he has brought in his wallet just the things that were desired. The shouts of one awakens all the others, and the chatter is great as the children rush about displaying their new-found treasures to one another. This morning the nursery rules are disregarded, because Christmas comes but once a year. Children are permitted to run upstairs and downstairs in their night garments; to skip about and laugh and chatter; and even to appear late at the breakfast table. It is more than likely, indeed, that the breakfast itself will be late, for the grown-ups in most households are usually as excited as the children. But it is Christmas Day, a day of joy for everybody. All the old stiff rules are relaxed for this happiest day of all the year.

Yet the church must not be neglected, nor must it be forgotten that Christmas is a sacred festival. To do honour to the Babe Jesus that was born in a manger at Bethlehem—that is the real meaning of the gladness of Christmas Day. So all you children should love to go to the church in the forenoon. It will be pleasant for you in many ways, especially if the air is clear, with a touch of frost in it, and the winter sun shining brightly. In any case you will find that the service in church, like the church itself, is brighter on Christmas Day than at ordinary times. You will like to see the old church trimmed up with holly and holly-berries; you will join in the cheerful Christmas hymns with more than your usual heartiness. It will be pleasant for you to think that all over the world, men and women of every nation are doing honour to One who was once a child like yourselves.

Then it is home to dinner, a real Christmas Dinner. I do not suppose that you will dine with a boar's head on the table, or that you will be permitted to taste a peacock stuffed with spices and sweet herbs. These were two of the dishes that figured in the good old times, but they have long been discarded. Yet the Christmas goose is still popular, and in almost equal favour is the roast beef of Old England. With you children, however, the plum-pudding and the mince pies and the fruit will be in most demand. How many helpings? I dare not say how many, for Christmas Day brings its own appetite, but you must try—just a very little—not to be greedy when the pudding comes in ablaze.

Because greediness is ugly, and also because Christmas does not end with dinner-time. There is the evening with its romps, its games, its dances and its Christmas Tree. It is the Christmas Tree, probably, that will give you most pleasure, with all its glittering ornaments, its coloured flags, and its lighted candles. This is a pleasure which English children, in the old times, did not share, because the Christmas Tree for children was only introduced to this country in the reign of Queen Victoria. Indeed, the whole tendency nowadays is to make of Christmas a children's holiday. This is well; because by so doing—by making the lives of all children, and especially all poor children, brighter at this season—we shall give most honour and praise to the Babe that was born in lowly Bethlehem.

BOXING DAY

When people are in a good humour—and everybody is supposed to be in a good humour at Christmas—they find it easy to give little gifts to their relations, friends, children and servants. On Christmas Day these gifts are given to friends and the children of the household, but on the day after Christmas the servants and dependents obtain their share of the gifts in what is called a Christmas Box. Hence the 26th December has come to be recognized as Boxing Day. This is a very old custom, and probably it has its origin in certain customs that were observed by the Romans during the Saturnalia. At that season presents were distributed to all, and for one day, at least, the Roman slaves received the gift of freedom. That was a good custom.

It was wise for the early Christian Church to adopt this method of giving presents at Christmastide, but the custom has lost some of its wisdom by use. The art of giving wisely is a very difficult art; almost as difficult as the art of receiving wisely. At Christmas time this becomes very plain to us, and it is especially obvious to us on Boxing Day. Many of the gifts bestowed on that day are bestowed with a grudge, and received as a matter of right. That is not as it should be, for all pleasure is lost when a gift is bestowed in a stingy spirit, and taken with a thankless hand. I feel sure that you children do not give or receive your Christmas boxes in that manner. If you have any little gift to bestow upon the people who do you a service throughout the year, you will do it cheerfully. And if any one gives you a little gift, do not turn it over and over looking at all sides, but accept it with thankfulness and a cheerful countenance. By so doing you will find that Boxing Day is one of the most pleasant days in all the year.

For a London child there is an interesting event that always happens on the 26th December. The pantomimes begin upon Boxing Day. Your old friends the Harlequin, the Clown, the Pantaloon bounce upon the stage with all their old antics and most of their old jokes. But the more ancient the jokes are, I think you like them the better. When I was a boy I liked to see the Clown play tricks upon the policeman, and startle innocent people with a red-hot poker. I am sure that you feel just like that to-day, and that you laugh as heartily as I did. There is nothing better than laughter; and throughout England, in every playhouse, a great tide of laughter begins upon Boxing Day.

And now we have reached almost the last day of the year, and quite the last page of this little book. Since New Year's Day we have travelled together, and I have tried to explain to you the meaning of the various Holy Days and Holidays. I have tried to make the explanations interesting, and not exactly like the dull books that grown-ups read. But I am not sure that I have succeeded; holidays are stupid things when they are set down in print. It is far better to take them just as they come along, and enjoy the good things they bring. Holidays are like the pictures in a dry book. When I was a boy I sometimes skipped the reading and enjoyed the pictures. You can skip the reading in this book if you like.

Sources:

Hendry, Hamish. E.F. Mason. "Christmas Eve." *Holidays & Happy Days*. London: Grant Richards, 1901. 106 - 111. Electronic.

Hendry, Hamish. E.F. Mason. "Christmas Day." *Holidays & Happy Days*. London: Grant Richards, 1901. 112 – 115.. Electronic.

Hendry, Hamish. E.F. Mason. "Boxing Day." *Holidays & Happy Days*. London: Grant Richards, 1901. 116 – 120. Electronic.