

How the New Year Knows When to Come

by Elizabeth Gordon

The Boy named Billy had begged to be allowed to stay up to greet the New Year. He had something he wanted to ask him if he could only see him, but he presently got so sleepy that his eyes wouldn't stay open and so off he went to bed and to sleep.

But all at once there was a great tooting of whistles and ringing of bells, and a skyrocket went "whiz" right past his window. The boy named Billy sat up straight in bed.

"Oh," said he, rubbing his eyes, "the New Year has come and I didn't even see him."

"Happy New Year, Billy," said a jolly little voice. The boy named Billy rubbed his eyes to make sure—yes—he really did believe that there was a roly-poly little person sitting on the edge of the clock shelf swinging his bare pink feet and smiling happily.

"Why," gasped Billy, "who are you?"

"Whom did you expect?" asked the little fellow. "I'm Father Time's youngest year, to be sure. Haven't got my license, or my number yet; I'm waiting until this racket stops. Were you looking for me for any special reason?"

"What I want to know," said the boy named Billy, "is, how does the world know where one year ends and a new one begins?"

"That's some question, youngster," said the jolly New Year, laughing merrily, "and it took the funny old world some time to settle it. You see the year cannot be divided evenly into months and days, because the time actually required for the earth's journey around the sun is 365 days, 5 hours, 48 minutes and 46 seconds. You call that the solar year, because the word 'solar' means concerning the sun.

"The old Romans tried having the New Year come on March first, but they had no real system, and were always in trouble. So Julius Caesar, the king, told the world that it was most important to have a calendar that could be depended upon to take care of all the time, because there wasn't any too much, anyhow. So with the help of some very wise men he took the twelve new moons of the year and built a calendar around them. This was called the Julian calendar, and every fourth year figured this way was made a 'leap year,' and was given an extra day, making it 366 days long.

"But putting in a whole day every four years was too much, and after this calendar had been used over 1,500 years it was found that the calendar year was about ten days behind the solar year which wouldn't do at all.

"So Pope Gregory XIII directed that ten days be dropped from the calendar that year and that the day after October 4, 1582, should be October 15. Then he rearranged the calendar so the New Year would begin January 1 and the calendar year and the solar year kept together. The Gregorian or New Style calendar as this one was called is the one we are using today.

“New Year’s Day has been celebrated in various ways since the dawn of civilization, and if today we could travel around the world on a magic carpet what a wonderfully interesting sight we would see!

“If you were in China you might think the Chinese saved their holidays to celebrate all at once. They close their shops for several days while they make merry with feasts and fireworks and general exchange of gifts and good wishes. In preparation every debt must have been paid, every house swept and cleaned, and each person furnished with holiday clothes and a supply of preserved fruits, candies, and ornamental packages of tea to give to his acquaintances.

“In some European nations, especially France and Scotland, New Year’s Day is a more important holiday than Christmas. If you were a French peasant child you might put a wooden shoe on the hearth for a gift at Christmas, but grownups in France exchange gifts at the New Year festival, at which time there are family parties, with much merrymaking.

“In America the observance of New Year’s Day is varied. New Year’s Eve there are ‘watch night’ services in the churches—gay street revelers—dancing and theater parties; and New Year’s Day is a time for general entertaining and visiting. However, the old custom of keeping open house and making New Year’s calls has practically disappeared.

“People are always glad to see the New Year and always welcome us in some glad and cheery way,” went on the New Year. “And it has always been the custom among all people to exchange gifts and greetings in the name of Happiness on New Year’s day. The Old Year is supposed to take away all sorrow and sadness, and the little New Year is supposed to bring nothing but happiness into the world, so it depends upon each person to see that he gets his share of the happiness.”

“How?” asked the boy named Billy.

“Easily,” answered the little New Year. “By living straight, playing fair, being kind and honest and helping those not so fortunate as you are. That’s all there is to it, little friend. And there goes the last whistle and now for three hundred and sixty-five days of real living. Happy New Year, Billy.”

“Now I wonder,” murmured Billy sleepily, “if that was really so, or did I dream it. I’m going to read up on that calendar thing the very first thing I do, and I’m going to play I saw the New Year anyway; and I’m going to try to do just as I think he would want me to ’cause I want my share in making this year a very, very happy one.”

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