

NEW YEAR'S DAY

Hamish Hendry

Little children are usually snug in bed when the first holiday of the year arrives. It comes at midnight when all is dark out of doors. Sometimes the weather is very cold, here in England, with snow upon the ground; and as it nears midnight on the 31st December there is a great silence beneath the stars. The children are in bed; but in most homes there are grown-up people—fathers, mothers, uncles or aunts—who sit late and watch the clock. They watch; and when the clock strikes twelve they know that the first day of the New Year has arrived.

Then it is no longer silent out of doors. The bells are ringing loudly, and ringing merrily; they are ringing a welcome to the Stranger. So the grown-up people, who have been watching the clock, rise up smiling and wish each other a Happy New Year. The father says to the mother: "I wish you a Happy New Year, my dear," and in saying this they shake hands, and kiss each other. Then the mother, if she has children in bed, goes upstairs. They are all asleep; so she does not waken them. She simply kisses them, each one, and smiles as she whispers: "A Happy New Year to all of you, my dears." That is how the New Year arrives in England. In Scotland there is more ceremony. There it used to be the custom for the whole household to sit up till twelve o'clock and bring in the New Year with singing and frolic. But that custom is dying out.

You children, I hope, get to know about the New Year in the morning. You find that everybody is looking happy, and wishing happiness to other people. Even although the sun is not shining there is brightness in the house and in the street. People when they meet shake hands and joke and laugh. Your aunt will give you a good hug, and more than likely your uncle will put his hand into his pocket and give you something; something round and bright; something that will make you smile. Then you learn that the New Year brings gifts as well as gladness.

But nowadays the giving of presents is not so common as it used to be. Far back in English history the grown-up people gave each other gifts on New Year's Day, and some of these gifts were very beautiful and very costly. Diamond necklaces, gold caskets, jewelled swords, embroidered mantles—these were the kind of gifts which rich people gave to each other at the feast of the New Year. Our English Kings and Queens, in the old days, received many such precious gifts. Queen Elizabeth got so many valuable presents in this way that a list of them was kept upon parchment, and in the history books it may still be read.

This custom of giving rich presents to rich people on New Year's Day exists no longer in England; and that is well. For in many cases these costly gifts were given not from kindness but from selfishness; the gift-givers wanted some favour in return. Now, it is an ill thing to begin a New Year with a spirit of greediness. None of you children, I am sure, will do so. Be thankful that you have got the gift of another New Year's Day. It is the first clean page of a fine new book in which you can write just what you please. Write something cheerful; and see to it that there are no blots.

Source:

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