

THE STORY OF CHRISTMAS



Manly P. Hall



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To fully appreciate the festival of Christmas, we must come to understand what it has meant to man as a spiritual experience since the beginning of recorded history. We know that this sacred season has been held in the deepest veneration by the peoples of many races and nations, and that it has descended to us as a beautiful heritage of tradition. In these days, when facts seem so important, we are inclined to question the origin of our beliefs, and we would like to know how and where the Christmas celebration originated; in what ways it has been changed and modified with the passing of time; the sources of the various symbols now associated with the season; and perhaps most of all, why we should perpetuate the old rites and customs. Originally Christmas was not a festival imposed upon man by some special system of belief. It came from his own heart, and he has preserved it down through the ages because it was strangely and

wonderfully meaningful to him. It might be very good for us if we could restore this meaning at a time in our history when we feel that faith in our fellow men is so vital to our personal security.

All things in Nature grow from their proper seeds, and unfold the life within them, nourished and sustained by universal laws. This is likewise true of institutions and practices, and it is especially true of Christmas. The celebration began when the seed of faith took root in the soul of mankind. This was truly long ago and far away. With the rise of Christianity, faith blossomed into hope, and in more recent times, the flower bore the fruit of charity because such was its way of lawful growth. Thus we find Christmas analogous to the graces of faith, hope, and charity. It has been wisely said that men cannot live by bread alone, but must gain part of their nutrition from beauty, love, and friendship. These gentle sentiments bestow strength, and without them we lack the courage of our most sober convictions.

Most of the older nations of the world have claimed the honor of being the first to celebrate Christmas. States that no longer exist are remembered traditionally for their festivals at this season. It is not likely that we will ever know either the precise location or the exact time of beginning of this festival, but it is safe to say that it antedates Christianity by thousands of years. It has always had strong religious implications, and reference to special rites and rituals peculiar to mid-winter are to be found in the sacred books of many faiths and in the earliest works relating to history. For the period of prehistory, we must try to understand the ways of our remote ancestors and the forces operating both internally and externally in the development of culture and civilization. We know that the basic instincts of human beings change slowly, and that within ourselves the first dreams of mankind are still awaiting fulfillment.

In the beginning, our primitive forebears were nomadic. They wandered about sustaining themselves largely by hunting the wild beasts that roamed the jungles and the plains. Gradually, communities came into existence. Villages and tribes set up relatively permanent abodes, and this led toward the development of agriculture. It became necessary to till the soil and to create codes of conduct and enduring relationships. We should remember that in those days man was a lonely creature, overwhelmed by the magnitude of his environment. At the same time, however, he was naturally curious, and his faculties of observation were developing. Slowly but surely our remote but thoughtful ancestors became aware of the mystery of universal life. They could not explain, nor could they fully comprehend, but as the poet tells us, they saw God in fire and heard him in the winds. Some strange but invisible energy sustained the infinite diversity of creatures, and there were laws and rules which had to be obeyed. Obedience was the secret of life; disobedience, the way of death.

Of all wonderful things, the most immanent was the miracle of generation. The seed which seemed lifeless and very small was planted in the earth. The sun shone and the rains came, and from the dark womb of the soil, life was released. Is it remarkable that the unlettered and unlearned should accept the miracle of the germinating seed as a spiritual symbol of life, death, and resurrection? Was it any more remarkable that man should apply this symbolism to himself—not only to his body, but to the soul within it? Did not God sow seed when he created the world, and were not the seeds of God locked within the bodies of all the beings which the Divine Power had ordained? Did not Jesus use the same symbolism when he declared in the Parable of the Sower that the seed is the word of God?

Observation often leads to practical knowledge. The first agriculturists came gradually to realize that there were proper seasons for planting and harvesting, and there were also seasons during which the great spirit of the earth rested and would not yield its abundance. Thus, without the aid of modern science, men began to observe what we call the phenomena of the year. It is evident from the old records that most of these observations originated in the northern hemisphere, where most early cultures had their beginnings. By degrees, the four seasons—winter, spring, summer, and fall—were noted and remembered because of the changes and transformations evidently peculiar to each. At the vernal equinox, it seemed that the sleeping earth awakened and revealed its fertility. This was the proper time for planting, and the soil was turned with crude plows. Men rejoiced at the promise of a fortunate yield because there would be food for all. At the summer solstice, the sun reached its meridian. Everywhere living things were industrious and active, and vitality was abundant. Then came the autumnal equinox and the time for harvesting. There was a full spirit of ripeness in the air and in the earth. It was proper for men to reap where they had sown and to profit by their wise labors in the previous months. After the crops had been taken in, the winter solstice, which fell about the 22nd of December, was certain to come. Great Nature herself, the loving mother of all living, wrapped her robes about her to rest and sleep.

With winter came the cold, ice, and snow, and these were associated with death. The days were short and the nights were long. It was therefore time for prayer and supplication. Those who had done evil were encouraged to repent their ways, lest their sins fall upon their tribes. Offerings were given, and men united in a common pleading that the grace of light would be returned to them. There were several long quiet days, and the the joyous

celebration of the annual birthday of the sun. The great orb of light had heard their prayers, and had graciously turned his face upon them. The promise of the new year had come, and it was proper not only to be grateful, but to rejoice, to share all happiness, to make good resolutions for the future, and to dream of the bright warm days that lay ahead. This was the ancient way; the way of our long-forgotten forefathers, whose simple rites and rituals have lingered on through innumerable ages.

The mystery of the seasons was closely associated with the revolution of the sun. It is not really true that most ancient peoples were sun-worshippers, but they certainly regarded the glorious source of light as one of their earliest and most important religious symbols. First of all, the sun represented light, not only that which illuminated the body, but also the light of the soul, of the mind, and of the spirit.

It bestowed upon man the wonder of the days, and his eyes were gladdened by the beauties made visible to him by the splendor of the solar orb. The sun also warmed him, and he grew to observe that this kindly light also warmed the earth, causing the seeds to sprout and the plants to grow. In itself, the sun was also a blazing mystery—the most glorious thing man could contemplate. He did not understand its astronomical significance, but he lived every day under its benevolent influence. It shone like an eye in the sky, an eye that always watched him and watched over him. It stood as a witness to the principle of universal life and to the God who had placed it in the sky and given it authority over the seasons of the world.

Nearly 1400 years before the birth of Christ, a kindly and gentle human soul ruled over the double empire of Egypt. This was Akhenaten, the pharaoh-mystic who made a wonderful symbol of the sun, with each of its rays ending in a human hand. He called this the *Aten*, the light of the world, and in his

meditations he contemplated the goodness of the sun. He was moved to declare that Aten, the glorious disc of day, gave its light to all nations, to all races, and to creatures of every kind. It shone equally upon the just and the unjust, with a beautiful patience. It neither judged nor condemned; it simply gave light and life forever. Akhenaten taught that earthly rulers should be like the sun, and that good men everywhere should share their life and light, for in so doing, they honored the source of their own existence. Because of the mystery of the sun, Akhenaten did not make war on neighboring states, nor would he condemn their gods. Equality was bestowed upon all things by the example of the sun.

Every night the sun went to sleep, or as some believed, it went through the gates of the west to light the underworld, and the earth was darkened. Men feared the dark and the wild animals that roamed in the blackness of night. They huddled in their caves for mutual protection, and later built fires to restore confidence and protect themselves not only from savage beasts, but from ghosts, specters, and those sad spirits that wandered in the darkness. Human beings could only sleep and pray for the return of light, for when it came it would restore their spirits and provide the hours necessary for the labors of survival. From the beginning, then, men learned to love light and to fear darkness, and when they prayed for light, they made offerings to the sovereign sun. Even the fires which they built were symbols of the solar power, for these fires took away some of the darkness. The Incas of Peru went so far as to kiss the sunbeams as part of a sacred ritual of veneration to the invisible God who was made known to them first through the wonders of light.

In the course of time, men became more learned, for observation led naturally to reflection. Scholars and sages rose among them, and wonderful religious institutions came into being, and

these were served by venerable and venerated priesthoods. These creeds and codes, however, originated in the experience of the human race, and they were closely associated with the sun, the seasons, and the seed. By degrees, and by popular consent sustained by learned contemplations, the ceremonials of the winter solstice came to take precedence over all other sacred rites.

The Magi, living in the valley of the Euphrates, studied the stars and the motions of the heavens from their tall towers in the desert. They measured the seasons, and they discovered the three long dark nights which accompanied the winter solstice. They also learned that immediately afterward the days began to lengthen, and they interpreted this phenomenon as peculiar proof of God's love. They said that heaven had made a pact and promise with the earth, and that the world would soon again be green and covered with flowers. So these ancient priests of Persia lit their sacred fires, and all the people rejoiced and did honor to the reborn God of light. In Greece, there were great processions of rejoicing. There were midwinter rituals at Delphi celebrating the rebirth of the beautiful deity Dionysius, who was represented as a cradled infant born from the sea. In the great sanctuary of the State Mysteries at Eleusis, the holy birth was dramatically re-enacted in the quiet hour of midnight.

At this season also, the lusty Romans celebrated their Saturnalia, a long and important festival which terminated on Christmas Eve. In the old calendar, December 25th was marked with the words "*Natalis Solis Invicti*"—the Birthday of the Invincible Sun. Probably no special calculation was necessary, for everywhere and always even the ancestors of the Latins had kept the birthday of the solar mystery. This was sufficient to make this time and season unique in the spiritual experience of mankind. This festival was always a kindly occasion. Men, either in gratitude or through fear, were motivated to generous and

unselfish actions. It was always the worship of the gods, for the Saturnalia was their birthday. But the enlightened pagan had already learned that the God-fearing must also be the human-ity-loving. At the winter solstice, families gathered in solemn celebration; friends long separated were reunited; and enemies were reconciled. The very spirit of thankfulness was in the air, and it was wise and proper to remember the good things that had come, and to plan for a happy future.

The priests of ancient Britain were called the *Druids*, or *men of the oak tree*. At the winter solstice, these great bearded patri-archs, clad in flowing robes of white, entered their sacred groves to cut the mistletoe. They carried knives of beaten gold, and it was their custom to use the white berries and bright green leaves of this parasitic plant to make wreaths around the crude monolithic stones of their altars. Still on Salisbury Plain stands an ancient ring of huge rough stones called *Stonehenge*, as a con-tinuing reminder of this ancient faith. It was in places like this that the early Britons gathered to venerate the return of the sun. The Druids sent runners across the hills with blazing torches, and with these they lit the new fires on both altar and hearth-stone. Through the land, flames blazed from the tops of hills and the depths of valleys. Watching the shadows cast by the sun, the Druid priests found the certain indication that the solar orb was returning.

We have referred to the pre-Christian celebration of the win-ter solstice festival under the broad heading of "faith." This is sustained by the attitudes of the worshipers. They regarded the cycle of the sun-god as a direct evidence of divine providence. They neither questioned nor doubted, but accepted with com-plete gratitude the symbol of the Divine Presence. To them, it was enough to live in the glory of the day, to work and to play according to the seasons and the rules which the invincible sun

had established for them. Man lived upon universal bounty; all that he was, he owed to the gods who had created him in their own likeness and had given him dominion over the land and the sea. Every important work was accompanied by worship, for all that mortals could do was to trust in the divine benevolence. They were not burdened by their faith; rather, they rejoiced in the privilege of being grateful and of revealing in all their labors their certainty that the gods were in the heavens and all was right with the world.

Nearly 20 centuries ago, the Christian faith was brought to a sad and troubled world, in which too many human beings had forgotten to be grateful. Christianity began as a small faith, mostly local in its sphere of influence. For several centuries, the new faith existed precariously in a pagan atmosphere, and it was not until after the conversion of Constantine Magnus, early in the 4th century, that the religion became safely established. In the early years of the Christian communion, there was no general consensus of opinion as to the month or day of Jesus' birth. Because of this, Christmas was not among the earliest festivals of the Church. It is quite possible that the first converts intentionally refrained from creating a festival to honor the birth of Christ. They had rejected the elaborate pagan ceremonies, and did not wish to create a similar celebration of their own. Actually, none of the older Fathers seems to have known the month and day of the nativity, and it has been said that there is no month in the year which some respectable authority has not assigned as the birth-month of Jesus. One early writer said that it was generally believed that Christ was born on the 20th of May, and another, equally devout, selected the 10th or 20th of April. Several groups were convinced that the Master was born in January, and it remained for Pope Julius, who reigned in the 4th century, to officially assign the date of December 25th.

This leads to the realization that there was a gradual trend toward bringing the birth of Christ into harmony with the greatest celebration known in the ancient world. This is quite understandable, since it was not the policy of the church at that time to actually destroy the altars of ancient gods, but to cleanse them of their older symbols and rededicate them to the Christian faith. It is always easier to accept new doctrines than to change old ways. If these difficulties can be reconciled, the results are usually fortunate. There were a number of philosopher-mystics among the early Christians, and these gradually identified Christ with the sun. They saw in him the light of the world, the greatest light of all time, the true light that lighteth every man that cometh into the world. Ideas must have symbols, so that they can be expressed and more readily communicated. Perhaps the old pagans had mistakenly worshiped the sun without realizing fully the meaning of salvation; or perhaps they did know, but expressed themselves in unfamiliar terms. If Christ was the light of the world, was he not the true sun-hero, the light-bearer, who was the desired of all nations? As the sun lit the sky and made the earth fruitful, so the Son of Man cast his light into the souls of humanity, making spirits fruitful for good works.

Whatever the motive may have been, it was not actually the legislation of men or of priests and bishops that established Christmas. It was an intuitional recognition of the appropriateness of the great sun-symbolism. In these ways, the first Christians were influenced in their selection of the most proper and fitting day, and by the 5th century A. D., the date of the Christ-Mass was almost universally accepted throughout the many branches of the Christian faith. Other factors may also have influenced this decision. The first Christians found it expedient to assemble for the celebration of their faith on the festival days of

their pagan neighbors. Only on such days could they gather inconspicuously and with slight probability of molestation. Later they were given official privilege to meet on certain days, but by degrees the emergency measure became an accepted tradition. There was also the fact that missionaries and evangelists traveling into distant regions found it easier to convert the peoples of these lands when they were permitted to preserve their ancient festivals. Perhaps the conversions under these conditions were not as complete as might be wished, but at that time it was important to maintain friendly relations.

Originally, the Christ-Mass was almost completely religious within the body of Christendom. It combined several sacred occasions, including Epiphany, a feast celebrated on January 6th commemorating the coming of the three Magi to the crib of Christ, or, as it is said, the first manifestation of Christ to the gentiles. In the 4th century, the marriage feast of Cana and the feeding of the multitudes with fishes and barley loaves were included in the Christmas festivities. The broad form of Christmas, as we know it, seems to have originated in western Europe, but spread rapidly eastward and in the middle years of the 4th century was observed in Byzantium at the court of Constantius.

It was not the Mass in the church or the cathedral which first and most completely expressed the Christmas spirit. This true festival came directly into the lives of all concerned. It was an intimate religious experience—a sacrament in the home by the fireside and, most of all, in the heart. It was dedicated to the memory of a little child who was to become the undisputed ruler of the human heart. This child, born in a stable surrounded by animals, was not a temporal sovereign crowned and sceptered, for his kingdom was not of this world. His was the rule of love, and he was the Prince of Peace. Even the poor and the illiterate

could understand the life-way of the gentle Nazarene. They tried to restore his spirit in themselves by doing his works, and by honoring his memory through acts of Christian charity. They celebrated Christmas in memory of him, and in the way they believed he would have wished. They remembered his teachings that if a man would love his God, he should love his brother also. It was the original intent that during the Christmas season, love should rule the world, in anticipation of the day when the Lord of Love should return to his kingdom and rule over all men in spirit and in truth.

The attitudes of medieval man were largely influenced by his environment. His personal opportunities were limited, his requirements were few and simple, and he was subjected to a variety of misfortunes, natural or man-made. As might be expected under such conditions, he devised his own amusements and took advantage of every possible opportunity for gaiety and celebration. His manners were rude, and many of his customs would seem offensive to us. He was devoutly religious and he turned to his faith for security because he had no concept of improving the conditions under which he lived. It is notable that medieval man had not yet awakened to the idea that he would help to build a better world for himself and others. He certainly possessed humanitarian instincts and the rudiments of social consciousness, and he revealed these instincts most strongly and clearly through his celebration of Christmas. Gradually, he came to identify this festival with the emotion of hope. The birth of Christ meant to him the assurance of ultimate well-being, if not in this world, then in a better place beyond death. He rested his hope in God, for he had little faith in his fellow men, and even less in himself. Yet for him the Heavenly Father had sent his son into the world in the likeness of a mortal person. Through this wonderful intercession, the gates of salvation

had been opened, and the lonely, the tired, the sick, and the poor, were not forgotten.

We know that even today sorrow and adversity incline us to seek the consolation of the spirit. The middle ages of European history were burdened with war, plague, drought, and famine. The individual could not cope with these vast problems. He could only accept them and turn to his faith for strength. Under such conditions, the natural mysticism in the human soul found its fullest expression. With this came the rise of Christian mysticism and the gradual identification of the Christ-story with the changes wrought within the human soul by piety and devotion. All this led in due time to the firm belief that there was a divine power within man which was the very presence of God. The coming of Christ was re-enacted in the life of each individual who chose to live according to the spirit of the Master's teachings. At Christmas, there was not only the beautiful tradition of a child born in Bethlehem, but the timeless symbolism of eternal truth born in the heart of man. This was understandable, even in days when men's minds were scarcely touched by philosophic insight.

We should also remember that during these long dark centuries men still lived in a world which belonged essentially and factually to God. The individual did not feel that peculiar reverence for human achievement which has developed in the last hundred years. Today in our emergencies we turn to institutions fashioned by our own ingenuity. We are dazzled by our own ability and powers and have gained a false sense of self-sufficiency. The way of heaven appears to us remote and incomprehensible. Probably it is good that we have learned to solve many of our own problems, but most of these solutions pertain only to physical comforts and securities. If medieval man was too small to meet his own needs, modern man has grown so large that he

has forgotten his own basic requirements. Every day he is faced with uncertainties and troubles, but he blunders along trying to solve with his mind critical situations which demand a greater essential enlightenment than he actually possesses.

It is nice to feel that we have conquered the primordial darkness with an electric light, or overcome its isolation with the automobile, the telephone, and the airplane. Yet none of these can actually bridge the interval between human souls. The old loneliness still lingers, and when we think beyond and through our numerous commendable achievements, we must finally come to realize that the human being is still a citizen of a vast space. The heavens roll above him; the earth must sustain his empire; the life of the sun is still his salvation, and he would perish if a vitality greater than his own did not make the seeds to grow and children to be born to him. He is also dependent upon the light in his own soul for health and happiness, and, whether he admits it or not, he still lives in a mystery, and he still has need of hope. To contemplate these greater truths, and to experience internally the presence of the eternal, are necessary extensions of consciousness. With all our wisdom and our skill, if grace is not born in our hearts, we are a tired and saddened creation, wandering down through the ages without vision and without purpose. Our ancestors knew this, and acknowledged it with sincerity and humility. It would be good indeed if we could restore such understanding. We can enrich the old ways and fill them with greater joy and a better hope, but we cannot afford to become cynical and reject convictions which we sorely need.

The spirit of Christmas descends to us largely through a group of symbols long associated with the festivities of the season. These symbols may well be termed *archetypal*, for they reveal the gradual growth of fundamental ideas subjected constantly to

new interpretations. A symbol must always mean what we understand it to mean. It has no substance of itself, and if analyzed or dissected loses most of its significance. Christmas would be a greater spiritual experience for the average individual if he would make himself receptive to the impact of the legendry and lore surrounding this celebration. Each of the familiar practices has its own gentle and friendly message. It not only gladdens our present festivities, but causes us to share for a moment in the common aspirations of our kind. We have a better total concept of humanity if we permit ourselves to be quiet and to feel our bond with the ages. This may inspire us not only to cherish the nobler ideas of the past, but to advance them and find new motives for preserving our priceless heritage of life and liberty.

It makes no difference whether the Christmas symbols originated in Eastern nations or in ancient pre-Christian times. They belong to a universal pattern of gentle remembrances. They tell us that man has always instinctively longed to love the beautiful and to serve the good. Great and noble souls lived and labored and died ages before the miracle at Bethlehem. There is no ancient good or modern good; there is only goodness itself moving through time. Gratitude is not historical, nor is beauty denominational. Many streams have flowed together; many quaint practices and curious rites have met and mingled. It is good to realize this, for it will help us to broaden our vision, deepen our understanding, and advance such necessary causes as world peace and inter-religious friendship. It is really and truly wonderful if some part of our Christmas came from ancient Egypt or India or even remote China. These are regions on a map, but the people who inhabit them are one creation in God and under law. In their hearts and souls, their hopes and fears are like our own. The fears are ever present, but the hopes we have not yet learned to share.

Christmas can be an invitation to universal friendliness and the quiet realization that one life from one eternal source must flow into the souls of all men and restore in them the recognition of their common origin, purpose, and destiny. Let us therefore examine some of these symbols with open hearts and minds. We may profit more from them than from learned books or grave discussions. We should always remember also that we cannot gain more than we give. To the degree that our hearts are open and our instincts and intuitions kind and fraternal, to that degree we will understand and, through understanding, experience a measure of religious insight not otherwise possible.

Many countries have popular legends by which they claim the distinction of having given the Christmas tree to the world. The pine, fir, or evergreen has long been associated with the idea of immortality because it remains green through the long winter period, and is thus a fitting symbol of the inevitable victory of life over death. Sprigs of acacia, cypress, cedar, or fir were used to decorate ancient altars, and there are references to them in the Bible. The thorny tamarisk was considered a sacred tree by the early Arabs, and it is supposed that from its branches was fashioned the wreath of thorns which was set upon the forehead of Jesus. The tamarisk has a strange and wonderful vitality, for when it is cut down and trimmed and made into door-posts it will take root and send out boughs which will arch the doorways. Here again the tenacity to life appeared so remarkable that it caused popular veneration.

A Scandinavian myth of great antiquity tells of a fir tree which sprang from the blood-drenched soil where two lovers had met a violent death. On a certain night during the Christmas season, mysterious lights-like candles-were seen on its branches, and neither wind nor storm could extinguish them. There is also a tradition that in the 8th century, Boniface, an English missionary,

went to Germany to convert remote tribes that still worshiped Wotan and the old gods of the Norselands. He seems to have found these people celebrating the rites of the winter solstice. In the midst of a throng of worshipers stood Wotan's ancient oak tree, adorned with offerings and garlands. Supported by a group of converts, the good saint resolved to cut down the ancient oak with all its pagan implications. It was a huge tree, and the blade of the ax seemed scarcely to gash its surface. But at that moment, a strong wind rushed through the forest. It shook the great oak, which, toppling on its foundation, fell backwards like a broken tower. The wind, however, did not disturb a little fir tree which stood behind the oak and was revealed by the falling giant. The saint then told the people that from that day on, the little green tree, a younger child of the forest, should be a symbol of holiness.

There is a 13th-century French legend of a wandering knight of the age of chivalry, who, while traveling deep in the gloom of a heavy woodland, found there a gigantic tree, presumably an ancient pine, the branches of which were covered with burning candles. Some of the candles stood erect on the branches, and others had fallen or bent into weird crooked shapes. On the top of the tree was the vision of a beautiful child with a halo of light around its head. There seemed to be no living person about, and the knight left the place filled with wonderment. The pope was appealed to for an explanation, and he declared that the tree undoubtedly represented mankind. The child was the Savior, and the standing and falling candles were good and bad human beings. Here we find the symbolism of the tree of life decorated with the deeds of mortals. The tree laden with gifts and bright trinkets was like the tree of The Revelation, which bore upon its branches the twelve manner of fruit, and this fruit indeed was for the healing of the nations.

There is also a gentle lingering story that Martin Luther was the first to light the Christmas tree with small candles. Perhaps he only revived an earlier practice, but still it has come to be associated with his name. One Christmas Eve, when Luther was traveling alone in a snow-covered countryside, he was suddenly impressed with the thousands of glittering stars that seemed to hover over the earth. All the world was shining with a strange and wonderful light, and the bright points in the sky mingled with the deep green shadowy trees along the road. Luther was struck with a happy thought and, arriving home, he tried to explain his feelings to his wife and children. He went out into the garden of his house and cut a small fir tree, which he placed in the nursery. He then put candles on its branches and lighted them. There is a popular German engraving which shows Martin Luther seated in the midst of his family with a lighted Christmas tree on the table before him. In this symbolism, the tree certainly represented the earth and the candles, the starry heavens. In the mystery of Christmas, heaven adorns the earth, and they are united and share in a common glory.

Pyramids or cones of green paper covered with wreaths or festoons of sweetmeats are sometimes substituted for Christmas trees in Germany. It is curious that similar pyramids decorated in the same way are carried in marriage ceremonies in India. We learn that these trees represent the world-tree, or the fragrant tree of ages, or the flowering tree of perfect gifts which grew on the slopes of Meru, the mountain of the gods. These tree-symbols are wishes for good fortune, long life, many children, and happiness through the years. The tree represents also universal energy upon which we all depend, and by the gift of which we are always sustained.

In Japan, the evergreen or fir represents strength, honor, integrity, courage, and devotion to truth. In the art of these people,

the pine is often shown keeping lonely vigil on some rocky crag. Its very lonesomeness has given it strength, and it can survive both storm and stress. The gift of the fir branch is a kindly way of saying: be of good cheer, we are with you, and our thoughts and our love shall guard and guide you. The fir is the tree of peace, for from it homes are built. It is a sign of everlasting life, for its branches are ever green. It also points upward to heaven with a single green spire. This then is the tree of the Christ-child, about which gentle spirits should gather, not in the dark wood of Wotan's grove, but in the home by the side of the family fire. It shall not be seen where there are deeds of evil, but where loving gifts are exchanged and rites of kindness are inspired and practiced.

We note the early association of the Christmas tree and the candle. At about the time of our Christmas festival, the Jewish people celebrated their Feast of Lights. As lighted candles were a feature of this ritual, they are to be seen twinkling in every Jewish home in Bethlehem and Nazareth and in many other parts of the world at about the same time as the Savior's birthday. *Hanukkah*, the Feast of Lights or Feast of Dedication, commemorates the re-dedication of the temple in Jerusalem and the great victories of the Maccabees which brought religious freedom and national independence to the old Jewish people. It is interesting to note in this connection that the German name for Christmas is *Weihnacht*, the Night of Dedication. For centuries, priests and peasants read their Bibles and other sacred writings in the long quiet evening by the light of a candle. St. Jerome is so depicted in a beautiful old painting by Durer. The candle, therefore, became symbolic of the light of the soul, the little flame burning within man by which he understands what he reads or studies. The light of understanding dispels all darkness, overcomes all doubts, fears, and hates, for a man cannot live in

darkness if there is a light burning steadily within himself. At Christmas we share the light, and it blazes in the window in our homes to remind all strangers and passers-by that the light of our soul is strong in this time of solemn celebration.

Music has long been associated with the Christmas Season, but the early chants, litanies, and hymns written in Latin were hardly suitable for secular use. According to legend, the *Gloria In Excelsis*, the hymn supposedly sung by the angels on the occasion of Christ's nativity, was the first Christmas carol. It is believed that songs in the popular languages and with simple but reverent wordings were introduced by St. Francis of Assisi, who desired to bring the Christmas mystery closer to the lives of the people. Carol singing spread slowly but surely throughout Europe. It became customary for troubadours and minstrels to contribute their services to the joy of the holiday season. Secular singing of Christmas folk-songs gained special favor in England. Choral groups sang in the streets and outside the houses of friends and relations. In a subtle way, these singers, like the angels of old, brought the good tidings of great joy.

It is surely a pity that so gracious a custom has failed among us. There is something really lacking when we are satisfied merely to turn on a phonograph or listen to the radio. We lose the pleasure of the many rehearsals, the planning and preparing, and most of all, the direct action of singing together those simple melodies which, coming from the heart, convey their message to expectant ears. If we can sing and work and play together, we can live together with quicker sympathy and kindlier attitudes. Singing Christmas songs with a congenial group helps to create and sustain the mood of the Season. The sacred songs remind us of the solemnity of the occasion and its great meaning as a spiritual mystery. The secular melodies contribute to the happy

spirit of the occasion, inspiring good fellowship and cheer. Music is a universal language, and whether or not we understand the words, we feel the spirit behind them, and faith and hope glow a little brighter in our hearts.

We have mentioned that our ancestors became boisterous at times and developed a number of more or less secular devices and amusements. Mumming was often an important feature of the Christmas festivities. The word *mummer* means a masker, and this custom seems to be traceable to the ancient Roman Saturnalia. Originally, mumming consisted of men and women exchanging their clothing and, thus disguised, going from one neighbor's house to another. By degrees, various costumes were introduced, as well as masks with fantastic expressions. This custom is related to the rites of the stranger at the Christmas Season. It was assumed that during the celebration, the door was open, and anyone seeking food or shelter was made welcome in the name of the Christ-child. In these days, of course, strangers were few in the little villages and towns, and the ritual could not often be exercised. It was therefore permissible for neighbors and relatives to conceal their identity and play the parts of strangers. They were not supposed to be recognized, but were made welcome and invited to share in the festivities. In the very ancient pagan world, there was a belief that gods and godlings might visit the earth disguised as mortals, and it would be a serious oversight if they were not made welcome and permitted to share the common bounty. So Christmas became a time of open house, for perhaps the very spirit of Christ might enter in some unfamiliar likeness.

Mumming was also considered symbolic of the visit of the Magi to Bethlehem. In the year 1377, citizens of the city of London, to the number of 130, variously and elaborately disguised, paid homage to the young Prince Richard, son of the Black

Prince. These mummers, dressed in royal and noble raiment and mounted on fine horses, apparently re-enacted the visit of the Magi or the gentiles who came to honor Christ. Some of them blackened their faces with burnt cork to signify Asiatic or African peoples. They set three jewels before the young prince, consisting of a golden bowl, a cup, and a ring of the same metal. By this pageant, these Londoners fulfilled the ancient promise that before the feet of the Holy Child, all men should kneel and all nations should give homage.

Among the Christmas traditions said to have been introduced by St. Francis of Assisi is the *creche*, or nativity scene, usually found in Latin churches. The birth of Christ is represented by small figurines artistically arranged in a setting which resembles the stable at Bethlehem. There are statues or figures of the holy family, shepherds, angels, and often the three wise men. These are surrounded by statuettes of cattle and sheep, and over all hovers the star of Bethlehem. Many of these nativity scenes are beautifully contrived and help to emphasize the occurrences associated religiously with Christmas Eve. Such vivid reconstructions were especially useful in those days when men could neither read nor write, and where religion was often presented to them by miracle-plays enacted on the broad squares before the cathedrals. Like music, these depictions transcend language barriers and nourish the reverence which men like to feel and to express on sacred occasions.

We have already mentioned the peculiar veneration in which mistletoe was held by the British Druids. We are not surprised, therefore, to find that it has descended among the many English customs associated with the Christmas Season. The mistletoe is a parasitic plant which attaches itself to trees with great tenacity and generally lives as long as the tree itself survives. In Germany, the word for mistletoe signified "all-heal," and the plant

was held to possess mystical and magical virtues. The ancients believed that mistletoe was nourished by the air and light, and by the rays of the moon. When it was cut, it must never touch the earth, or its powers would be destroyed. There has long been a religious symbolism relating to this plant, which may have been derived from the idea that it symbolized the impermanent relationship between the body and the soul. Like the soul, the mistletoe is attached to a body, but has a separate existence in space, and it also receives into itself strange energies and forces moving in the air. The presence of mistletoe in the homes of our ancient forebears was considered as a benediction and, if true lovers stood beneath its branch, it brought good fortune. Here is one of the most beautiful of the old Christmas customs, devoutly religious in its original meaning. It would be no exaggeration to say that to stand under the mistletoe means actually to stand under the wing of the holy spirit of life, or to accept the guardianship of the power of the soul.

No discussion of Christmas could be complete without mentioning Santa Claus. The name is said to be an American colonial corruption of the Dutch *Sant Nikolaas*. Historically, the man we remember as St. Nicholas was born at Capara, in Lycia, and although a layman, he was made Bishop of Myra because of his exceptional piety. He is said to have died in 343 A. D. In Christian art, he is usually represented in episcopal robes, accompanied by three purses and three children. From his earliest years, this Saint particularly venerated the Christ-child, and he practiced throughout his life the child-like virtues of meekness and humility of spirit. Because he performed all his good works in the name of the infant Jesus, children were taught to regard him as their patron saint. He also gained distinction as a protector of innocence and morality. There is a legend that good St. Nicholas gladdened the hearts of three poor girls who wished

to be honorably married by secretly throwing purses of money into the window of their home, so that they could have suitable dowries. This is why three purses have come to be his particular symbol. On many other occasions, he also provided for the distressed, but he always arranged his gifts so that none would know their source. If he was asked, he would say very quietly and sincerely that Christ was the true giver of all gifts.

In memory of this Saint's anonymous philanthropy, mothers concealed apples, nuts, and pears—sometimes clothing, shoes, and caps—in their children's rooms on St. Nicholas Eve, and when morning came, and the presents were discovered, they would follow the holy man's example and simply say that St. Nicolas had brought them. It was an early custom to hide such presents in shoes and slippers, so that the children would find them when they dressed. Average folks did not have stockings at this time, but when these became customary, there was no objection because stockings hold considerably more than shoes. Incidentally, St. Nicholas was usually pictured as a portly man with kindly expression and a very long white beard. It is possible that the familiar costume in which we represent him was originally intended for vestments, but by degrees, these were modified to a more secular apparel.

There are other elements which have contributed to the Santa Claus legend. Among the ancient Egyptians, there was a rotund and amiable deity named *Bes*—a gnome-like figure who was also regarded as the patron of little children. This god lived with the other deities at the North Pole and is supposed to have labored industriously throughout the year making dolls and toys for the boys and girls who were good and obedient. He could travel invisibly through space, and had a wonderful way of knowing the virtues and faults of the children he visited. St. Nicholas seems to have been first adopted officially as the patron of children in

the Netherlands and, on St. Nicholas Eve, the little folks leave their wooden shoes filled with hay for the horse which the good Saint rides when he jumps from roof to roof, leaving toys and sweetmeats. As Christmas falls in winter, the snowy season in the northern hemisphere, St. Nicholas appears warmly clothed and accompanied by symbols dear to the hearts of our Nordic ancestors. His reindeer originated in the old rites of Odin and Balder. In the southern hemisphere, where Christmas falls in midsummer, Santa Claus is also a favorite. He arrives as usual in his sleigh, accompanied by artificial snow and much gaiety.

There is some talk these days that disillusionment about Santa Claus has a disturbing effect upon the psyche of the modern child. The little ones are supposed to lose faith in human nature when they finally discover that St. Nicholas is a spirit rather than a person. There is some question, however, as to whether such neurosis is due to a kindly and beautiful legend, or results from what we so glibly call "a factual attitude toward life." When we lose the child-heart, the heart of simple faith and joy, we have no defense against neurosis or any of those melancholy evils which follow upon poverty of spirit. The long tradition about St. Nicholas has invested him with a kind of psychic reality. He is one part of our own natures, having a real and factual existence in the world of thought. As he was a kindly man who loved children, and wished to bring them happiness, we perpetuate his story by gifts given in his name and in his memory. He is not a god of merchants, but in a strange way, he is associated with the Christ-mystery. The Master loved the little ones, and gathered them about him and told his disciples that of such as these was the kingdom of heaven. By degrees, children can come to know that Santa Claus lives in their own hearts as the splendid impulse to give and to share. When we buy expensive gifts for

our friends, we gain a kind of selfish satisfaction. We like to be known for our generosity. St. Nicholas, however, preferred to remain unknown, and the philosophy of it all is very simple.

Every day we live, the heavens and the earth bestow their benefits, but these are not proclaimed and, by degrees, we take them for granted. Eternal life itself is the ever anonymous giver. Whatever we may do that is kindly or charitable is not of ourselves but of the spirit in us which, as St. Paul said, “doeth the works.” Behind all giving is the one giver, worshiped of old as the sovereign sun, and today as the mystery of Christ. Like St. Nicholas, we are the servants of a spirit of giving, and it is not always wise that the left hand should know what the right hand doeth. Christmas is the day which symbolizes to all Christians God’s most splendid gift to mankind. We attempt in small ways to re-enact this miracle, and what better way than to do our good works silently and secretly, as Nature does, and then ascribe them to some gentle symbol of unselfishness like old St. Nicholas?

The time-honored custom of exchanging gifts at Christmas is also associated with the Roman Saturnalia. During this festival, the citizens of Rome exchanged presents, greeting cards, and boxes of food. They seem to have originated our idea of a Christmas box with assorted contents. Under Christian influence, a few coins were often included so that the recipient might pay for a special Mass appropriate to the season. It was customary for a patrician to invite his retainers and servants to join the family for this celebration, and he remembered each one in a fitting manner. The custom spread throughout Europe and England, and the lord of the manor was host to all his tenants and their children, and there was usually a special program of music and cheer.

For nearly fifteen centuries, the concept of Christmas-giving and sharing was comparatively free from what we call "commercialism." In older times, there were neither means nor circumstances which invited extravagance. Gifts were considered important principally because they represented the personal thoughtfulness, skill, and industry of the giver. Presents were quietly accumulated through the year. In their shops and stores, merchants took time now and then to fashion with their own hands toys and trinkets. Housewives sewed and embroidered and, as the season approached, they were of course busy preparing foods and pastries. Even the children shared in the benevolent conspiracy and the general atmosphere of expectancy. They drew pictures and wrote poems, memorized songs, and helped to gather the decorations for the house. There was no problem of the competitive value of presents given or received. Communities were essentially poor, but this placed no restraint upon the spirit of thanksgiving and the pleasure of small remembrances. The very simplicity of the old Christmas was part of its charm and helped to keep alive and bright the sacredness of the celebration. After all, it was in honor of a man who had renounced the things of this world; for the birds of the air had their nests and the beasts of the field had their lairs, but the Son of Man had no place to lay his head.

Because of the intense spiritual overtone provided by the religious aspect of Christmas, our forefathers were mindful of the solemnity of the occasion and there was an air of serious reverence with their rejoicing. It was good to be thoughtful and to remember that the Christian way of life required not only devotion, but an inner strength which could be victorious over adversity. Man must exercise eternal vigilance against selfishness and pride and those false emotions which obscure the light in the human heart. The spirit of Christ was the invisible guest in

every home on Christmas Eve, for the festivities were in remembrance of the Holy Nazarene.

We have come to think of Christmas as a child's holiday, and we may ask ourselves if we can restore all that this implies. Are we really so sophisticated, mature, and grownup that we forget that we are all children? We are not only children of this world, but of the greater world, and our attainments are slight indeed when compared to the mysteries of life which surround us. There is a wonderful spiritual release in discovering the child-likeness in ourselves. Do the young ones enjoy the brightly lighted Christmas tree any more than do the doting elders? The joy of the parents is in the happiness of the child. It may be that children get most of the presents, but we get most of the joy from watching their bright eyes and listening to their exclamations of surprise and wonder.

It may well happen that we can injure our children on this occasion by our very desire to please them. We should never teach the young by word or example that Christmas is only a lavish season in which we cater to all their wishes. We should never substitute presents for parental thoughtfulness through the year, or use them in an effort to buy respect or admiration. A Christmas present is a symbol. We give of what we have to indicate our intention to give of what we are. We tell our loved ones that they may depend upon us for strength and integrity and protection. It is a mistake if we allow the spirit of Christmas to be exhausted on a symbolic level. Nor should we bury the spirit of Christmas under a stack of presents. We say that it is unfortunate that times have changed and that Christmas is now a heavy economic responsibility. This is in part due to a general misunderstanding and to the changes which the motions of civilization have wrought. The average person is no longer sufficiently resourceful or skillful to make with his own hands the

gifts for his loved ones. He feels that he does not have the time, but, in fact, he lacks the inclination. So today he simply goes out and buys and joins the throng which has transformed this gentle festival into a merchants' holiday. Is the merchant really to blame because we try to buy a spiritual experience which can come to us only in our hearts?

We all need to appreciate Christmas as an excursion of the fantasy—a journey into the land of mystery—where everything is wonderful and beautiful, and good is always triumphant. It is a grand occasion to restate dreams and beliefs which we desperately desire to accept, and thus to rescue our minds and souls from the monotony of buying and selling, earning and paying. If we could really share in this festivity with a full measure of devotion, we would have new courage and vision with which to face the future, and there would be greater probability that we could keep our new year's resolutions.

With smaller families, urban living, and the weakening of ties and bonds due to these continual pressures we hear so much about, some face Christmas with sadness of spirit and an attitude of nostalgia. Folks will say that they dread the modern Christmas because it only reminds them of those good old days when neighbors and relations gathered to sing carols, and the odor of good cooking was in the air. Loneliness is not easy in any season, but particularly difficult is the lonesome Christmas. Does it have to be this way? Why not accept the effects of changing time and realize that we are all one family—one people under God, the Eternal Father? The stranger is not different from our own, and our next-door neighbor may also be lonely. We can often find the cheer we seek by giving it to others, thus establishing friendly relations that may endure for many years.

With all the talk against Christmas and the sober resolutions not to become involved in the frantic cycle of buying, giving,

and receiving, there is one thing we should always remember. The importance of Christmas depends upon ourselves. It is a festival of the spirit and, if our souls are filled with the deeper meaning of the season, it will not be merely a burden. If we understand the old symbols and capture their messages of hope and inspiration, no one can spoil our Christmas. To say that our way of life has destroyed Christmas is merely an attempt to excuse our own deficiencies. One might as well say that it has destroyed Christianity or the natural instinct to religion deep within all of us. To restore the dignity and joy of this season, we must liberate the Christmas Spirit from the false concepts with which it is now associated. Unfortunately, two celebrations that were once distinctively separate have been united in the modern Christmas. The first and most important of these was the sacred festival, extending from public worship to private communion. The second is the exchanging of gifts. By degrees, Christmas presents have taken the place of the Christmas Presence. The Christ-Mass is forgotten all too often, or at least has lost a part of its vital meaning.

If you want to restore the real Christmas, there must be something more than merely a half-hearted desire. Change is brought about by action, and even a small effort, sustained by a kindly determination, can accomplish much. Some people do not like traditions. They believe we have outgrown the past and must blunder along according to contemporary convictions. Yet in the last fifty years, the policies which we least admire have become accepted as a tradition, and we are bound to the new ways as rigidly as though they had ages of precedents. Let Christmas center around things that you yourself can do that will bring happiness to others. Call the neighbors in; perhaps the children that you know would have a wonderful time singing the old carols or helping to decorate the house. Go into the kitchen and

prepare some festive dishes or a jar of cookies. By degrees, if you really try, you can bring the ever waiting and ever willing presence of Christmas into your life. The old memories will stir within you, and you can preserve for a new generation one of the kindest recollections we have ever known. Even if Christmas may not be a happy memory, it can be a happy fact, here and now. This is a good opportunity for positive spiritual thinking. We all desire to be happy, and we are naturally grateful for the blessings we enjoy. The greatest of these blessings is love, and God so loved the world that he gave his only begotten son that men might have the everlasting experience of spiritual grace.

We said earlier that the third phase of Christmas history is related to charity. We interpret charity as supplying the needy or providing for the underprivileged. This is part of the word, but there is much more. When St. Paul referred to charity, he said: "Thus abides faith, hope, and charity, and the greatest of these is charity." The word he used is *charitas*, and the original meaning is *love*. If our Christmas spirit falters it is because, in some way, our love falters. Perhaps we are a little too selfish or self-centered, or we may find it difficult to overcome unhappy memories. Let us remember that Christ personifies the love of God born into the world for the salvation of man. The Christ in us, which is indeed our hope of glory, is therefore manifested through our purest and most dedicated affections. If we can find the love which abides within us, it can become the ruler of our world and the constant source of good words, kind thoughts, and gentle deeds. When we hang the mistletoe above the door, we are saying that love has come into our house, and where true love comes, the spirit of Christ reigns supreme. With love lighting the way, shining upon our lives like the star that crowns the Christmas tree, there can be no longer any darkness in our hearts.

According to the symbolism of this sacred season, faith and gratitude, hope and joy, love and peace, which together form the grace of the spirit, were made flesh and dwelt among us in the grotto at Bethlehem by a mystery which we can experience but never fully explain in words. We know that this spirit also abides in our own hearts, and through us its perfect works are made manifest. Love finds its fulfillment in the constant giving of its life and light. Our Christmas depends upon the purity and beauty of the simple affection which we bestow upon this season and all that it means to ourselves and others. If we so understand and so appreciate, our Christmas will always be beautiful.



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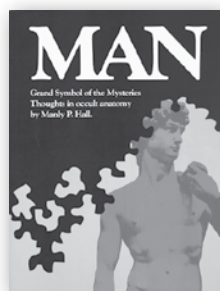
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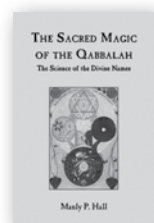
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Manly P. Hall founded the Philosophical Research Society, Inc., a non-profit organization in 1934, dedicated to the dissemination of useful knowledge in the fields of philosophy, comparative religion, and psychology. In his long career, spanning more than seventy years of dynamic public activity, Mr. Hall delivered over 8000 lectures in the United States and abroad, authored over 150 books and essays, and wrote countless magazine articles.

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