



The Nativity

DOMINICANA

Vol. IX

DECEMBER, 1924

No. 3

Colonial Christmas

By BRO. EDWARD BRENNAN, O. P.



HERE is nothing perhaps that exercises a more delightful spell over the imagination than the memories of the holidays and rural customs of former times. Of all the festivals of the year, that of Christmas awakens the strongest and most heart-felt associations. "There is a tone of solemn and sacred feeling," to quote the Sage of Sleepy Hollow, "that blends with our conviviality, and lifts the spirit to a state of hallowed and elevated enjoyment."

The English, to whom we are indebted for so much of our earliest tradition in the United States were particularly fond of those festivals which interrupted the stillness of provincial or colonial life. This taste for holiday pleasures was due partly to their infrequency, and partly to the prevalence of rural habits in every class of society. Especially observant were our forefathers of the religious and social rites of Christmas. And it is with no small sense of delight that we recall some of their quaint customs, their complete abandonment to mirth and good-fellowship, which during this season, seemed to throw open every door and unlock every heart to loving comradeship.

It is to be deplored, however, that the colonists did not foresee our desire to know the details of the manner in which they spent Christmas. However much they may have been given to talking about themselves, they had a strong aversion to gossiping on paper or in print. Interesting would have been the tales they could have left their children had they not been too busy with social duties to think of leaving an account of their round of gayeties. As it is, we must content ourselves with a few musty old diaries and meagre letters that hold scant reminiscences of these earlier days. The New England records, con-

sisting largely of Puritan protests against celebrations, sometimes afford us tantalizing hints of the nature of the festive occasions when our sturdy stock of ancestors, of a non-Puritan persuasion, relaxed for a space and forgot their cares in harmless merrymaking. Virginia, so warm-hearted and romantic, has little more than a hazy tradition to satisfy our inquisitiveness; the whole South, in fact, is particularly bald of accounts. The few records and peevishly small epistles that still exist, seem to become significantly silent at the approach of the Christmas holidays. And without meaning to wound the memory of our forefathers, it is safe to infer that they were too engrossed, these old cavaliers, in the pleasures of the season, even to think of burdening themselves with accounts of their social functions; some indeed consuming more spiced wassail than may be reconciled with the holding of a pen.

The first years of colonial life saw few set times for holiday-making. The feasts of the Romish and English Churches were offensive to Puritans and their public celebration was at once rigidly forbidden by the laws of New England. The hatred of the wanton bacchanalian Christmasses" as spent in the mother country, was the natural reaction of the Puritanical mind against the excesses of the festival. Though Christmas to the Pilgrim savored of idolatry, when his own festival, Thanksgiving, became annual, it assumed many of the features of the old English Christmas. It was simply a day of family reunion in November instead of December, on which the Pilgrims ate turkey, Indian pudding, and pumpkin pie, instead of the hated "superstitious meats" of other Christians, such as boar's head, barons of beef, and plum pudding.

Of the first 25th of December in the American Colonies we know little save that it was spent, like many a subsequent one, in hard labor. Our hearts go out to the kindly master of the ship who marked the occasion by contriving that the men should "have some beere." (Account of William Brewster.) Of a later Christmas Day we are told that Governor Bradford ordered his men out to work as usual; but many excused themselves on the ground that it went against their consciences to spoil the holiday by servile labor. If it were a matter of conscience, the Governor replied, he would spare them until they were better informed. When he returned from work at noon he found the men engaged

in sport, and gave orders forthwith that there should be no games or revelling in the streets. "Since which time," the chronicler of 1621 concludes, "nothing has been attempted that way, at least openly." (Letter of Governor Bradford.)

By 1659 the Pilgrims had grown to hate Christmas more and more. It was, to use Shakespeare's words, "the bug that feared them all." The very name smacked to them of incense, stole, and monkish jargon. Any person who observed it as a holiday by forbearing to labor, by feasting, or in any other way, was to pay five shillings fine,—so desirous were they of beating down the "sproute of Episcopacy." Judge Sewall jealously watched the feelings of the people with regard to the Christmas observance and noted with pleasure the continued traffic throughout the day. Entries such as this display his attitude: "December 25th, 1685. Carts come to town and shops open as usual. Some observe the day, but are vexed I believe that the body of people profane it, and blessed be God no authority yet compels them to keep it." When the Church of England established services in Boston some years later, we find the judge waging hopeless war against Governor Belcher over it, and hear him praising his son for not going with other boy friends to hear the novel ritual. He says: "I dehort mine from Christmas keeping and charge them to forbear."

Perhaps some of the merrymakings of Christmas were carried to excess at this remote time of our American history. At least this is Stubbes' opinion (somewhat partial and Puritanical), vouched for in his condemnation of the participants of the Yuletide revelries as "hellhounds," and in his bitter tirade against their "deville's daunce" of merriment. Prynne said that Christmas ought rather to be a "day of mourning than of rejoicing" and not a time to be spent in "amorous mixt, voluptuous, unchristian, that I say not pagan dancing, to God's, to Christ's dishonour, religion's shipwreake and sinne's advantage." (Prynne's *Histrio-Matrix*.)

But time brings change, and even though the mills of the Puritan gods ground particularly slowly, we find mention in the diary of William Pinchon of a dance in the holiday season of 1783 at Endicott's, in Salem, descendants of the austere John Endicott who cut down the Maypole at Ma-re Mount. Picture the indignation of the stern old Puritan could he have foreseen

this radical departure from the primitive standards! And even at this late date, the elders shake their heads at the Christmas feasting and dancing. The diarist evidently thinks that they are becoming a bit reckless in their dissipations, for he records a goodly array of dances with noticeable care, as though each were drawing from him a concession to the devil. This season of 1783 is a startling variation from the previous one when Mr. Fisher, the minister, in his same town of Salem, "movingly addressed the people of his church and congregation in the close of his sermon, relating to their conduct, their morals, and profession as Christians, exhorting them to sobriety, and decency of behaviour on the solemn and joyful occasion." (Diary of William Pinchon.)

Turning to the few scattered accounts that relate to other sections of the country, we read of one Christmas Day in Virginia where the valiant John Smith was engaged on an expedition. The extreme wind, rain, frost, and snow of that rugged season compelled the men of his company to keep the feast among the savages, "where they were never more merry, nor ever so copiously supplied with oysters, fish, flesh, wilde fowl and good bread, nor ever had better fires in England."

Even the hard-working Dutchmen could take a holiday during this season of merriment, for we read in the Old New Amsterdam Records for 1654 that "as the winter and the holidays are at hand, there shall be no more ordinary meetings of this board (the august legislature) between this date and three weeks after Christmas." This ruling body, if its members in any manner resembled the renowned Wouter Van Twiller (as we are lead to believe they did), found scarcely more complacency and quiet of mind in the Christmas jollifications than in guiding the destinies of state for the peaceful and sober Hollanders.

Even into the frozen atmosphere of New England, with its hard-bound Puritan traditions, the warmth and good-cheer of the Christian Yuletide finally managed to creep and take hold of the inhabitants. We know that in certain localities of Massachusetts, such as old Narragansett, where an opulent community of Episcopalians had settled, two weeks of Christmas visiting and feasting were entered into with zest by both planters and slaves for many years previous to the Revolution. A Christmas service was always held in King's Chapel in Boston, and the

season was marked by presents to members of the family and to friends; and by "boxes" (a term long in use in this country and in England) to the servants and the tradesmen.

There are two authenticated accounts of Christmas in New York toward the end of the eighteenth century, both of them indicative of that simplicity and light-hearted insouciance with which our forefathers spent their holidays. It is only right to suppose that the placid state of conscience in which they dined, drank large bumpers, and sang their Yuletide carols followed quite naturally upon the religious observance of all their Christian duties. For the chronicler is at pains to record that "they went to St. Paul's Chapel in the forenoon" where the Christmas rites were kept with strict propriety.

The first of these two accounts is dated 1773. "Last Monday, the anniversary of St. Nicholas, otherwise called Santa Claus, was celebrated at Protestant Hall, at Mr. Waldron's, where a great number of the sons of that ancient saint celebrated the day with great joy and festivity." The second account is gathered from a record of Theophilus Bradbury to his daughter Mrs. Hooper. It tells of a Christmas Eve dinner which was given by George and Martha Washington to the Vice-President, Senators, and other members of Congress, in 1795. The silver and table ornaments are carefully described; then the menu, which would do credit to any table: "The dishes were placed all around, and there was an elegant variety of roast beef, veal, turkeys, ducks, fowls, hams, etc., puddings, jellies, oranges, apples, nuts, almonds, figs, raisins, and a variety of wines and punch." This was of course an affair de luxe, and the strictest amenities of social life were observed. Thus: "We took our leave at six, more than an hour after the candles were introduced. No lady but Mrs. Washington dined with us. We were waited on by four or five men-servants dressed in livery."

It was around the great glowing fireside in the old colonial kitchen where the homeliness and picturesqueness of the Christmas festival usually was centered. However bare the floors may have been, however cold and drafty the house, the kitchen always glowed with a beneficent hearth that radiated welcome and even a rugged beauty when "the old rude-furnished room burst flower-like into bloom." The sweet associations that link the kitchen hearth with Christmas and its festive joys may still

linger in the hearts of the aged, though they find no counterpart in the domestic surroundings of today. They formed a natural part of those close family unions that gathered during the holiday season. The rhymes of a colonial newspaper describe the spirit and enthusiasm of these home-comings:

"The day devoted is to mirth, and now around the social hearth,
Friendship unlocks her genial springs, and Harmony her lyre now strings,
While Plenty spreads her copious hoard, and piles and crowns the festive
board."

To provide the needs of the table, there was always a plentiful supply of venison obtained from the forests; for the colonists were great hunters. The table was made to appear very appetizing under its display of wild turkey, geese, pigeons, hares, and squirrels, which in those days were anybody's for the shooting.

One of the chief diversions during the Christmas season was the ball or assembly given either in the private home or at some public house, where dancing was the order of the evening. It was always marked by lavish show and formal etiquette. The quality, who arrived in coaches, wore their best costumes. It may be remarked that in matter of dress the eighteenth century was an era of great expenditure and taste for luxuries. During the dance, even the august old grandfathers and grandmothers felt no hesitancy in going through the steps of the stately minuet; while the jigs, reels, country dances, and hornpipes were naturally reserved for the younger folk.

How the children of the colonies spent the Christmas, it would be hard to say. According to our present ideas, playthings were few in number for the little ones, and consisted chiefly of the crude trinkets their parents made for them. Did the girls of this solemn new world receive dolls on Christmas to comfort them, as so many of our children do today? Certain it is they had something in the semblance of a doll, though far removed from the dainty creature every good little maid receives nowadays—small puppets, crude and shapeless, yet ever beloved symbols of maternity. The boys had their skates, and used them to advantage during the holidays. The Dutch children skated in the New Netherlands just as their ancestors had in Old Batavia. In Massachusetts and Connecticut, skating was among the many Dutch customs practised by the English children. New England

boys in those days went sliding on thin ice, broke through, and were drenched, just as boys and girls are today.

We fear to say more of the colonial Christmas and its customs lest we fall into mere fanciful conjecture. But it has been interesting, from the vantage point of the 20th century, with its manifold legacy from the past and its ample promise of the future, to glance back for a moment upon the early days of our country's history, to see once again the life of the people in all its energy, simplicity, and vivid coloring. Their Christmas celebrations were crude, perhaps, in comparison with ours. They lacked the comforts and refinement that enhance so much the joy and enthusiasm of our Yuletide festivities. They faced gigantic tasks and took their holidays with real zest and enjoyment. They thanked Divine Providence for the blessings they received, and were well satisfied!

PRETIOSA MORS

By BRO. GREGORY HEROLD, O. P.

Some say that trooping angels came,
When it was whispered she was dead,
And brought a wreath of lilies white,
And placed it on her golden head.

And then they heard, O wondrous wise!
The angel voices sweetly sing
Of how a saintly lily maid
Was cherished by a thorn-crowned King!