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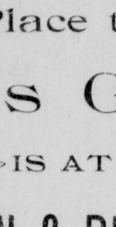
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The First Christmas Day In America

THE first American observance of Christmas day was far from a merry one. It was spent by Columbus and his ship's company among scenes of peril, disorder and excitement consequent upon the greatest disaster which had befallen the expedition. On Christmas eve the admiral's flagship, the Santa Maria, which had so stoutly plowed unknown seas since that distant September day when she dropped astern the outermost Canary island, laid her clumsy Spanish bones to rest off the coast of what is now Haiti. Her crew spent the following day, Christmas, partly on the Haitian shore and partly on her consort, the tiny caravel Nina.

The story of the disaster and the day may be told in this wise:

Sailing from the Tortugan roadstead, the flagship squared away for the coast of Haiti and entered upon her closing days.

In the morning watch of the 24th, the day following their return, Columbus gave orders that the expedition should start for Guacanagari's capital. The yards of the two craft were triced away, and a start was made in a light wind that blew almost dead ahead.

A strong current was sweeping the ship quickly along. Directly in her path was a sand bank, on which the breakers swept with a roar which open ears could have heard half a mile away, but which now sounded no warning to any on board. Suddenly the Santa Maria's keel grated heavily for some moments on the submerged sand, and then she struck violently and lurched to one side with a strain which sprung her masts.

All was confusion. The watch rushed to the bows and then jumped to the ropes. Columbus, rushing out from the cabin, took in the situation at first glance.

"Jesu Maria!" he exclaimed. "We have grounded!"

Christmas morning dawned on a scene of singular interest. Our fancy



THEY RAISED A CROSS.

likes to range back through four shadowy centuries to the new world's first Christmas and that remote and otherwise insignificant sand spit in the Caribbean, to that forgotten picture in which the devout children of holy mother church and the loyal subjects of their most Catholic majesties of Castile, Aragon and Leon toiled in thankful fellowship with the generous savages whom they had regarded as heathen. To seaward of the stranded vessel lay the caravel Nina and a small flotilla of canoes. Around floated spars, casks, coops and general wreckage. It had for some hours been evident that the ship was doomed to lay her bones to rest in Davy Jones' locker, and the admiral, with the coming of daylight, began to transfer to the Nina what was left of her provisions. In this work the cacique and his younger brother directly assisted him.

Toward noon the Spaniards discontinued work. For almost eighteen hours they had labored with scarcely an intermission and nature could stand no more. Their immediate prospects were as bright as they could reasonably hope for, as the more portable provisions and stores had been transported to the Santa Maria's consort. They now determined to rest until the cool of the day, when they should resume work. On coming to this decision they rowed to the shore and, in accordance with their custom, erected a cross on the highest point within convenient distance. This done, the yellow banner of the Spanish kingdoms, with its castles and lions, was displayed, and mass was celebrated in honor of the anniversary. Toward nightfall the work of transferring was taken up, but so great had been the moral and physical strain on the crews that it was soon judged best to await the ensuing morning, and after a vesper chant all hands, save a small watch, turned in, some on the shore and some aboard the Nina. Thus ended Columbus' Christmas in the year of discovery, 1492.—St. Louis Globe-Democrat.

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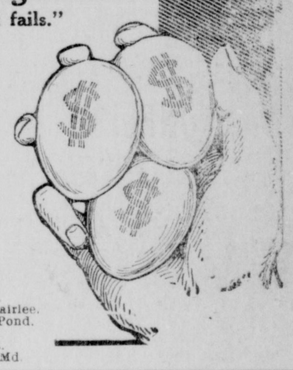
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