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COUNTING THE MINUTES



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MERRY CHRISTMAS

The First Christmas

IT often has been stated that the birth of Christ must have occurred four years before the date fixed on for the current chronology and that it is probable the event befell at some other time in the year than a few days after the winter solstice. The reason for the confident assertion is the ascertaining of the fact that Herod died about four years B. C.

The basis of this supposition is the report that at the time of the birth of Christ "there were shepherds abiding in the field, watching their flocks by night," a circumstance not natural in the latitude of Bethlehem near the shortest day. That is the height of the rainy season in Judea, and the date does not appear to have been observed generally before the fifth century.

Many students of Biblical history have argued that the story about the star of Bethlehem points to a date for the Nativity not later than May 8, B. C. 6. On that date the planets Venus and Jupiter were so closely in conjunction as seen from the earth that the apparent distance between them was equal only to the breadth of the full moon. These planets were



THE STAR OF BETHLEHEM.

then visible in the east a couple of hours before sunrise and must have produced a strikingly beautiful appearance and have been spoken of as one object. That was about fifty days less than two years before the death of Herod, a fact which harmonizes well with other conditions of the narrative, for it is probable that the mandate for the slaughter of all the children two years old and under was issued some months before his decease, and the limit of two years would leave an ample margin for any uncertainty as to the time of the appearance of the star, as related by the magi; also there were no paschal full moons on a Friday between the years B. C. 6 and A. D. 33 and no other following that till A. D. 60.

From this it would seem to follow that Christ was thirty-eight years old at the time of the crucifixion, and this would vindicate the sagacity of the Jewish doctors who affirmed that he was not yet fifty (forty?) years old. It is remarked, too, that in the spring of the same year there was a triple conjunction of planets—Saturn, Jupiter and Mars—and that the first two named were in conjunction as seen from the earth no less than three times in the year preceding—that is, B. C. 7.

Another theory about the star of Bethlehem which has been advanced is that the star seen by the magi is Spica, the leading brilliant in the constellation of Virgo, the Virgin. For many years before and after the Christian era the star was changing its place until it was then literally a "star in the east," and its movement in that direction may have been the very fact noticed by the wise men of some centuries preceding who expected that the prophecy about the Virgin would be fulfilled when its principal star reached the position noted. If this were so the visit of the magi from Bactria, in the far east, is easily explained, and the chief difficulty attending the explanation lies in the fact that such an important search as they undertook is noticed by only one out of the four evangelists.

The uncertainty of the centuries in regard to the date of the Nativity in year and month may never be cleared up. Its existence has been unfairly cited as reason for disbelieving the whole narration. The people of 2,000 years ago attached little importance to dates, except current ones, and it may be remembered that the destruction of Jerusalem occurred between the time of the Nativity and the writing of the gospels, at least in the shape in which it has come down to us.

THE STORY THAT NEVER GROWS OLD.

Like the songs that are sung in the twilight,
Like all tales that are tenderly told,
Like the memories of loved ones that hallow our hearts,
There's a story that never grows old.

Lo! The angels first sing it in chorus,
And the watchers with wonder behold.
They feel the first thrill of the beautiful truth
In the story that never grows old.

Round the Christ Child of Bethlehem's cradle
Are clusters of apples of gold,
And pictures of silver adorn every page
Of the story that never grows old.

It gladdens the hearts of all children,
And millions of manlier mold
Are happier, holier, better by far,
For the story that never grows old.

—Franklin Trusdell.

The Christmas Guest.

Whoso shall come any way this night,
By moor or hill or shore,
For him the blessed candles' light,
For him the open door.
(Oh, Mary, this for thy Son's sake,
Though mine comes in no more!)

My hearth is swept, my Yule logs burn,
My board is decked and spread;
For any who may seem in turn
Are warmth and wine and bread.
(Oh, Mary, grant my son this night
Be housed and comforted!)

Bid, banned or beggared come for guest,
My heart shall share his woes,
And on his head my hand shall rest
To bless him ere he goes.
(Oh, Mary, grant my son this night
That blessing and repose!)

This night, for thy one Son's dear sake,
Wait light and warmth and wine.
Oh, Mary, we be mothers both!
Take these my tears for sign,
And this I do for thy sweet Son.
Wilt thou not do for mine?

—Theodosia Garrison.

A Song of Christmas

TWINE the bittersweet and holly
Arched above the hearthstone's glow.
Joy, not melancholy,
Come, indrifting with the snow.
In each face the frost's a-tingle,
And afar on flying wing
Comes the sleighbell's rhythmic jingle
Through December journeying.

Set the board and ask the blessing
For the bounty amply spread,
In the simplest words expressing
What a loving Father said—
"Peace on earth"—for this is nearest
When the snows with us abide
And the winter air is clearest
In the hush of Christmastide.



HIS REINDEER STEEDS ARE PRANCING.

Bring the old musician's fiddle,
Relic of the bygone days.
Send the fairest down the middle
While the lilting music sways.
Light of foot and quick of laughter,
Swing the dancers, toe and heel,
As they pass or follow after
In the quaint Virginia reel.

Make a welcome for the stranger
Should his footstep cross the door.
By the memory of the manger
And the Christ that was of yore
Gather children's faces round you,
As he gathered them long syne,
If it be the years have crowned you
With their radiance divine.

Deck the tree and light the candles,
Let the stockings all be hung,
For a saint with furry sandals
O'er the housetops high has swung,
And his reindeer steeds are prancing
Through the star bespangled rime,
And the moonbeams pale are glancing
In the merry Christmas time.

—Ernest McGaffey.

Ancestry of Santa

WHAT is Santa Claus' age?

The jolly, roistering, pot-bellied, ever young old fellow that we know has made his appearance on earth in so many guises that the secret of his first coming threatens to remain forever veiled in the midst of antiquity. No one can say with any certainty just when he first made his appearance among prehistoric men, for merry old Santa in one form or another delighted children's hearts in many a pagan household centuries before the commencement of the Christian era and prior to any recorded history.

The name of Santa Claus, by which he is known in America, is the Dutch pet name for St. Nicholas. The name Kriss Kringle, by which he is known in England, is a corruption of Christ Kindlein or the Christ Child. But the festivities that distinguish Christmas existed long before Christianity, and a jolly god of good cheer appears as the personification of the period from the earlier pagan times. Now the Santa Claus of today is simply that old jolly god sobered up, washed and purified.

The Dionysia of the Greeks, the Saturnalia of the Romans, the Twelve Nights of the old Norsemen and of the Teutons all celebrated the coming of the winter solstice. People then gave themselves up to all sorts of revelry and excess. In the Dionysia the representative figure was not the young Dionysus or Bacchus, but the aged, cheery and disreputable Silenus, the chief of the Satyrs and the god of drunkards. In the Saturnalia it was Saturn; in the Germanic feasts it was Thor, both long bearded and white haired gods like Silenus.

Now, although the central figure of the Christian festival is the child God, the Christ Kindlein, the influence of long pagan custom was too strong within the breasts of the early Christians to be easily superseded. The tradition of hoary age as the true representative of the dying year and its attendant jollifications still remained smoldering under the ashes of the past. It burst into new flame when the past was too far back to be looked upon with the fear and antagonism of the church and there seemed no longer any danger of a relapse into paganism.

At first, however, the more dignified representative was chosen as more in keeping with the occasion. Saturn was unconsciously rebaptized as St. Nicholas, the name of the saint whose festival occurs in December and who as the patron of young people is especially fitted for the patronage of the festival which has come to be looked upon as especially that of the young. At first St. Nicholas did not supersede the Christ Child, but accompanied him in his Christmas travels, as, indeed, he still does in certain rural neighborhoods of Europe where the modern spirit has been least felt.

St. Nicholas, according to the hagiologist, was a bishop of Myra, who flourished early in the fourth century. He is the patron of children and schoolboys.

It is strange that everywhere St. Nicholas is most honored and his feast day most observed the most pious and instructed among the common people know little of the legend of the saint. He is treated with that mixture of seriousness and frivolity which becomes a dying myth.

In southern Germany and Austria a youth garbed as St. Nicholas and accompanied by two angels and a whole troop of devils in hideous masquerade, with blackened faces and clanking chains, on Dec. 5 (St. Nicholas' festal day) makes a round of certain houses where the little ones of the village have been collected. To the good children he brings gifts of nuts and apples, while the naughty ones are left to the devices of the satanic followers in his train.

In many places the bugbear overshadows in importance both the Christ Child and St. Nicholas. He appears under different names and in different guises. In Lower Austria he is the frightful Krampus, with his clanking chains and horrible devil's mask, who, notwithstanding his gilded nuts and apples, gingerbread and toys, which he carries in his basket, is the terror of the nursery. In Hanover, Holstein and Mecklenburg he is known as Clas. In Silesia his name is Joseph.

Sometimes the bugbear was a female. In Lower Austria she was called the Budelfrau. In Suabia it was the Berchtel who chastised children that did not spin diligently, with rods, but rewarded the industrious with dried pears, apples and nuts.

The female bogy survives especially in Russia and in Italy. In the former place she is known as the Baboushka, in the latter as the Befana. Befana is a corruption of Epiphania or Epiphany, for it is on Epiphany, Jan. 6, that the Italians make presents to their children in commemoration of the gifts given by the three wise men to Christ on that date.

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