

# Noël

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## NOEL.

This Corner is about Christmas and is intended for my younger readers and not for those superior people who tell us that Christmas is only a copy of some ancient pagan festival or the celebration of the winter solstice. It is not meant for those who would destroy all the romance of life, but for those who take pleasure in old tales and who are not too erudite to enjoy the delights of a Christmas tree and the other nice things which are proper to this time.

Let me therefore tell you something about the meaning of this feast and the customs which are associated with it in different parts of the world.

The word Christmas, which in Old English is *Cristes Maesse*, means the Mass of Christ. The word Mass comes from the Latin word *Missa* in the proclamation at the end of the service — *Ita missa est, Go; the assembly is dismissed*. The word came to designate the service itself and later was used in the sense of "feast." We find it in such words as *Michaelmas*, *Candlemas*.

Another name for Christmas is Yule, although this is found chiefly in the terms, Yule-tide, Yule-log. It is a very old word and is of disputed origin, although it is said by some to be derived from the Anglo-Saxon "Geol," a feast.

In France, Christmas is known as Noël, which is an abbreviation of the Latin word *Natalis*, for in Latin this festival is called "Dies Natalis" the Day of the Nativity, which in Italian gives us "Il Natale."

The German name "Weihnachtsfest" is derived from the preceding vigil and is I think a very pretty one, meaning as it does "The feast of the Blessed Night."

Christmas Day was not celebrated in very early times and such writers as Irenaeus and Tertullian do not mention it, but as the years passed, it gradually became surrounded by legends and customs, many of which have been handed down to us from our forefathers; and so it has become one of the most important festivals of the year, beloved especially by children, so that the mere mention of Christmas trees, turkeys, plum puddings and mince pies immediately evokes for us this great winter feast.

Christmas has always been kept in high esteem in Nordic countries, although in England during the Commonwealth it fell into disgrace, for in 1644 by Act of Parliament it was forbidden to consider Christmas as a feast and plum puddings and mince pies were banned as heathen superstitions. However, this sad state of affairs did not last long and soon the Yule log was burning merrily once more in the hearths and the little ones again enjoying the delights of pudding and mince pies.

Christmas trees are not so old as we might think. We first hear of them in Strassburg in 1605 and it was not until 1840 that they became common in this country.

As everyone is aware, Father Christmas is a most important person and he is known in various countries under different names. In America, he is called Santa Claus, which is the equivalent of St. Nicholas, being based on the Dutch form *Sant Niklaas*. In France, as "le Père Noël" and he used to be accompanied by "le Père Fouettard" who brought with him a birch with which to punish naughty children, whereas le Père Noël was laden with presents for those who had deserved them.

Of course, Father Christmas lives somewhere in the North, where it is very cold and he travels on a sleigh drawn by reindeer, and as he is now very old, he has white hair and wears a long white beard and a red robe to keep him warm.

This is common knowledge and I will therefore say no more. It is also well known that he comes down the chimney and wise people hang up their stockings and place their shoes and boots ready so that he may fill them with presents; but like everyone else, he has been obliged to move with the times, and in modern flats, where there are no fireplaces, to adopt more modern methods.

Now, if you wish to do so, you may write to Father Christmas and tell him what you would like for a present, and very probably he will reply, but you must know that his letters can only be read by means of a mirror, because Father Christmas is accustomed to write in the sky and, now that this is done by aeroplanes, everyone knows that sky-writing is written backwards. I once knew a little girl, who had a brother and a sister much older than herself, and when she wrote to Father Christmas, he used to answer her letters and tell her that he would do his best to please her, but that she must be sure to share any bonbons or marrons glacés which she might receive, with her sister and brother, and my little friend, who was a very nice little girl, always did as she was told.

As a matter of interest, it may be mentioned that the giving of Christmas gifts is a very old custom and the French word "Etrennes" is derived directly from the Latin word "Strenae."

Although in Northern countries the Christmas-tree is favoured, in Latin Countries it is usual to make a "Crib" and more or less elaborate ones are to be seen in every church, whilst most families construct one of more modest dimensions.

The vogue of the Yule log is wide spread and I should like to tell you about a few of the customs in connection with it. We find it mentioned in Germany as long ago as 1184. It has been said that the origin of the Yule-log is connected with the fire-festivals of the solstices, and that it is the winter counterpart of the Midsummer bonfire, kindled within doors instead of in the open air on account of the cold and inclement weather of the season.

In many places, the bringing in of the Yule-log was accompanied with celebrations and rejoicing. The log was not allowed to burn away completely but was kept carefully to protect the house against thunder and lightning. The following year the old log was used to kindle the new one.

In France, it is called the "Bûche de Noël" and similar beliefs are held.

The ashes are collected very carefully and are excellent for healing swollen glands and for other purposes, but it is unlucky to sit down on this log, for if you do so, you may become subject to boils.

Frazer states that in Berry, Normandy and Brittany, and in the Ardennes it was believed that the Virgin used to come and sit on it, invisible, swaddling the infant Jesus and they resented this contact with mortals.

In England, the practice of preserving a piece of the Yule-log of one year to light that of the next was observed in Staffordshire down to the latter part of the nineteenth century, and in the North of England, farm servants used to lay by a large knotty block of wood for the Christmas fire, and so long as the block lasted they were entitled by custom to ale at their meals.

There are other legends in connection with Christmas. Thus it was believed that the cattle acquired the gift of speech on Christmas Eve and conversed with each other in the language of the Christians. The conversation was, indeed, instructive, for the future, it seems, had no secrets for them. Yet few people cared to be caught eavesdropping. Frazer tells us that a farmer of Vecoux in the Vosges once hid in a corner of the byre to overhear the edifying talk of the beasts. But it did him little good; for one ox said to another ox, "What shall we do tomorrow?" and the other replied, "We shall carry our master to the churchyard." And sure enough the farmer died that very night and was buried next morning.

In the West of England near Glastonbury in Somersetshire, where once was a famous monastery, there grew a thorn tree which is said to have flowered once a year, for we are told that in the year 31, St. Philip sent St. Joseph of Arimathea with eleven others to convert the Britons; that St. Joseph, wearied out, planted his staff in the ground and, with his companions, lay down to rest; that, when they awoke, they found the staff turned into a thorn tree, which regularly for centuries, blossomed on the Eve of the Nativity.

And that this story be true, is shown by the fact that to this day, you may see a metal plate let into the ground to mark the site on which the shrub once grew.

It has always been the custom to feast at Christmas-time and a turkey has ever been considered necessary just as a goose should be eaten at Michaelmas.

The Plum pudding is an ancient English custom and in days of old, was brought into the dining room with great ceremony.

The lights were lowered and the pudding carried in by the cook, surrounded by flames from

burning brandy, and it was right and proper for everyone to pour a spoonful of the burning brandy over it and at the same time to make a wish.

Another legend tells us that we shall have as many days of good luck in the coming year as we can eat mince pies between Christmas and Twelfth-night. In France, the formal Christmas dinner is not so much in favour as Reveillon, when people make merry on Christmas Eve and it is almost a rule that oysters and boudin, as well as the time-honoured turkey, should be eaten.

There are doubtless many other stories and legends about Christmas, but I think I have told you enough for the present and should you wish to read a description of an old fashioned Christmas in England in the middle of the last century, you cannot do better than read Dicken's "Christmas Carol" and with this advice, I will wish you all

A Merry Christmas and a Happy New Year.  
ek.

## NEWS FROM THE COLONY.

COLLEGE OF THE SWISS MERCANTILE SOCIETY LTD.  
STUDENTS' CHRISTMAS DINNER AND BALL.

There are moments in a man's life, when one realises with almost unpleasant suddenness, that the years of golden youth are left far behind; that the spectre of old age is rapidly approaching. This feeling took hold of me last Friday, when I had the pleasure to be a guest at the Christmas Dinner and Ball of the students of the S.M.S. College. Fortunately this, perhaps unwarranted depression lasted only a few seconds, how could one feel sad, when one is surrounded by such a splendid array of young, happy and smiling faces; Old memories of my own student times, those carefree sunny days, when life seemed to be one great jolly adventure came back to me, when sorrow, worries and disappointments were an unknown quantity. Gaily and merrily I joined in the busy chatter, gone were those worrying thoughts about sands of life which are steadily and surely trickling away, I felt once again young, merry and bright.

It was a splendid idea to hold this feast at the Prince's Galleries, as the spacious rooms, and the many famous pictures which are hung on the walls, created just the right atmosphere.

The company which numbered about 250 people, sat down to dinner at about 7.30, the fare was good and wholesome.

A very pleasant surprise was in store for the participants, when Mr. Paschoud, the late President, accompanied by Mrs. Paschoud entered the Banqueting Hall; and the clapping of hands must have been a proof to him that he is not yet forgotten, although he has made Paris his new home. After all, Society work has at times also its compensations, in spite of those who will have it, that no thanks is attached to it.

Shortly before the coffee was served, M. J. Schneider, the vivacious Secretary of the Society, gave a most tremendous bang with a big soup ladle, instead of a mallet which could not be found. Sitting next to him, this tremendous noise nearly stunned me, but when he, with a stentorian voice, announced that the first toast was now going to be proposed, I realised that he had missed his vocation, and that he would have made an excellent lion tamer, his "roar" is at least as good as any lion which I have heard.

Mr. E. Hardmeier, who was in the chair proposed the toast to H. M. the King, which was rendered with musical honours.

Dr. Rüfenacht, the very sympathetic Commercial Attaché of the Legation, then rose amongst the hearty applause of the gathering. He said:

I feel very much inclined to start with the words so often and so carelessly used: "how time flies!" It is indeed already the second time since I am in London that I have the pleasure to attend the Students Annual Banquet and Ball, and it seems to me hardly possible that a year has elapsed since we gathered at the Imperial Hotel last December. That this is so, I realise by looking at the many faces around me among which, however, I see, as "der ruhende Punkt in der Erscheinungen Flucht," the familiar ones of the senior part of your School, the Education Committee, the Principal and the masters.

Let me thank you for your kind invitation to be with you to-night. It is always especially refreshing and pleasant for us who are standing more or less in the middle of our earthly life, to be asked to join the rising generation. For, after all, you represent the future, as we do the present and you will have to carry on the work which our generation took over from their predecessors. I am sorry to say that it is not a very pleasant job for which you are preparing, but perhaps, and I sincerely hope so, you will be better able and better prepared to deal with things as they are to-day, than we have been so far. You all know in what a bad state the world, and especially trade and commerce

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