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NEW YEAR'S DAY

Since time immemorial New Year or New Year's Day has been celebrated a mixture of Saturnalia and solemnity. The early Egyptians, the Chinese, the Romans, the Jews and the Mohammedans, all regarded New Year's Day as an occasion of special interest, although they differed as to the exact date or time of the festival, then too, the mood or individual circumstances of any particular religion or sect varied greatly one from the other.

In Rome, New Year's Day was a holiday. Ovid* speaks of the Romans refraining from law suits and strife, of smoking altars and white-robed processions to the capitol. In ancient Rome people exchanged gifts and greetings as well as wishing other people good luck. The main features of these New Year's Days were masquerading and feasting. In the early days the Romans and the Greeks began their New Year at the winter solstice, 21st December, later however it was changed to the feast of Ancyilia in March. It was in 46 B.C. that Julius Caesar added two months to the inaccurate calendar then in use and brought out the new Julian Calendar. January was designated as the first month in honour of Janus, the two-faced "father-god" of ancient Rome.

The ancient Egyptians, Persians and Phoenicians began their year on 21st September, at the autumn equinox. Persians celebrated their New Year's Day by giving each other eggs as gifts and releasing prisoners. The Chinese officially adopted the Gregorian calendar in 1912, but many parts of that country still celebrate New Year's Day between the last week of January and the second week in February. This was one day of the year when the emperor used to mingle with the people in merriment. Unlike the Chinese, the Japanese generally kept New Year's Day in quiet observance, they exchanged gifts and concentrated on their homes and also their accounts for the advent of the New Year.

The Sabians**, celebrated their New Year when the sun entered Aries. Before offering sacrifices to the gods of the various planets, the people and the priests would march to the temples in unison. During the Middle Ages the Catholic countries began their year 25th March, a day devoted to Mary. The Anglo-Saxon year in England began 25th December, accompanied by drinking and feasting. Before the eighteenth century the Russian year began in September. The Hindus called their New Year's Day Prajapatya, the Lord of Creation. They offered animals as sacrifice to their god of wisdom, named Ganesa. The Mohammedan world accepts 6th May as its official New Year's Day. The American Indian had their New Year celebrations on 21st June, consisting of an elaborate mythical drama of offering to the great plumheaded serpent. Mexico today thrills to the bullfights, whereas ancient Mexico offered human sacrifices after gruesome sacred rites had been performed by the priests.

Christendom accepts and does celebrate 1st January as the beginning of New Year. It is admittedly of pagan origin. The Encyclopedia Americana states: "New Year's Day is not a festival of the Christian church." However, the day is of high rank in both the Roman Catholic and the Anglican churches. Chambers Encyclopedia declares

that "in the Roman Catholic Church the De Deum is still sung at the close of the old year; and New Year's Day is a holiday of strict obligation". The Catholic Encyclopedia says: "Christian writers and councils condemned the heathen orgies and excesses connected with the festival of Saturnalia, which were celebrated at the beginning of the year". Other authorities say that the early "church fathers" such as Ambrose, Augustine, Chrysostom, Tertullian*** and others, "in reprobation of the immoral and superstitious observances of the pagan festival, prohibited in Christian use all festive celebration; and, on the contrary, directed that the Christian year should be opened with a day of prayer, fasting and humiliation. The mandate, however, was but partially observed". In the eighth century when the Hierarchy saw that the fasting idea was a failure, the idea was totally abandoned.

New Year Greetings

In 1584 Pope Gregory XIII called together a council of learned men who revised the scheme of computing time, other than the confusing Julian calendar. The Gregorian calendar was accepted at once by the Catholic countries, however the English parliament did not accept this calendar until 1752, from this time on January was generally accepted as the New Year's Day throughout the world.

The "Happy" New Year Idea, we are told by Chambers Encyclopedia, is an ancient Scottish custom which also prevails in many parts of Germany, where the expression Prosit Neujahr, May the New Year be Happy, attests the antiquity of the custom. The greeting of Happy New Year is still with us today. The New Year's Eve celebrations today as in ancient times represented an occasion for revelry and parties at expensive night clubs, cabarets, hotels, restaurants and many get-togethers for reunions in private homes. The incoming year is greeted with horns, bells, whistles and various forms of noise making. To top this, off, millions of people make New Year resolutions. Are these resolutions kept? hardly so; most resolutions are made to impress someone else of the short-comings of the individual himself. Persons with character, willpower, integrity, righteousness and love for their fellow men, do not need resolutions, all it needs is Faith in God, compassion, obey the commandments and live by the Golden Rule. People living thus do not need tranquilizers to sleep at night, in the day time, through their peaceful mind and eyes they see and enjoy the beauty of nature and the harmonious fellowship with their co-workers. The so-called daily struggle becomes a pleasure, it also brings peace and happiness to the loved ones at home.

(*) Ovid, Publius Ovidius Naso Ovid, a Roman Poet of the Augustan age, born in Sulmo (Sulmona a city in Italy) 43 B.C. (about 80 miles east of Rome).

(**) Sabians, or Mandaeans, an oriental religious sect of great antiquity, formed of heterogeneous Christians, Jewish and heathen elements.

(***) Ambrose, a celebrated father of the Church, born at Treves, Italy 334 A.D.

Augustine, Aurelius Augustinus, renowned father of the Christian Church at Tagasta, Africa, born 354 A.D.

Chrysostom, the "Golden Mouthed" a celebrated Greek Churchman born in Antioch about 344 A.D. died at Comana, in Pontus in 407 A.D.

Tertullian, Quintus Septimius Florens Tertullianus, a theologian of the Western Church, born in Carthage about 160 A.D.

Anton Haemmerle, Editor of the "Swiss American"
(by whose courtesy this was reprinted).