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CHRISTMAS IN SWITZERLAND

By JOHN P. ROBERTSON

In our age of sophistication there is something refreshing in the simple reverence with which centuries-old Christmas customs have been preserved in Switzerland. There is something peculiarly bracing in the sparklingly clear mountain air where some Swiss and many of their foreign guests elect to spend their holidays. There is a sense of revivification, rededication, and reconsecration that comes, particularly at Christmas time, from a long walk in a fir forest, somewhere on a mountain side in Switzerland, and there is an abiding charm in the manner in which old and young alike make their preparations for their Christmas holidays.

Many a boy who is proud that he has outgrown the belief in " Santa Claus " would be surprised to learn that, in Switzerland, there are professional Santas, and in the early days of December classified advertisements in Swiss newspapers are evidence of their willingness to bring joy to youngsters' hearts by means of a prearranged visit. At the appointed time, a white-robed, bearded Santa Claus, accompanied sometimes by an " Angel " and more often by a black-faced servant named " Schmutzli ", arrives at the home of the eager children. In kindly tones old Santa asks whether the children have been good since his last visit a year ago. If so, he rummages in his bag until he finds a package containing a gift which he leaves with the smiling boy or girl. Santa Claus always carries a bundle or two of switches for naughty boys and girls; but he seldom has to leave this latter souvenir of his call, as almost all little children in Switzerland are able to convince the kindly, indulgent old man that they have been perfect models of virtue.

What is even more surprising to many of Switzerland's winter guests is the fact that dear old " Santy " visits Swiss children on 6th December instead of Christmas Day. Indeed, it was only a generation or two ago that children looked forward to this day of the good St. Nicholas of Myra with more expectation than to the other great days in the Christmas season. This age-old story of Santa's visit, is not only told anew each year in every town and hamlet, but, in some places, has been dramatized and developed into a religious pageant of great artistic interest.

In the town of Küssnacht near Lucerne, for example, the eve of St. Nicholas' day is celebrated with one of the most elaborate processions in Swiss religious life. Stalwart mountain herdsmen lead the cortege, their long whips cracking out sharply in the night air. They are followed by some fifty white-robed dancers. Each dancer wears a gigantic " hat " made of a six-foot tower of cardboard with little many-coloured windows of tissue paper through which candles shine out from the inside like lights in a cathedral. Then come about 200 herdsmen bearing brass cowbells, large and small, clinking and tinkling with every step as the procession advances. They are followed by alphorn blowers, and at the very end we see, sedately marching, the robed and bearded figure of old St. Nicholas himself.

In the Catholic regions of Switzerland the days before Christmas find the children busy preparing their manger. A cardboard box with one side removed provides the walls of the little stall to represent Jesus' birthplace in Bethlehem. A smaller box, covered with brown paper and filled with straw, makes a manger, and wooden carvings or little plastic figures are arranged to represent Mary, Joseph, the shepherds with their sheep, the cattle, and the Magi with their servants and camels.

It is only a step from the carved figures of such a manger scene to the lively characters in a marionette play. And indeed, the Marionette Theatre of the Zurich School of Applied Arts has often delighted young and old at Christmas time by presenting a beautiful Nativity play; while far away, in remote mountain huts, children and their parents spend long December evenings building a puppet stage, dressing its figures in Biblical costumes, and rehearsing the various scenes of the birth of Christ.

The climax of all these preparations comes on Christmas Eve. All day long parents have been busy decorating the Christmas tree with tinsel, oranges, silver bells and sparkling stars; and now, after supper, the whole family is gathered together in the parlour with its mysterious mound of prettily wrapped packages, piled about the base of a tree alight with real candles. This is the great family reunion. While grandfather and grandmother sit back in their easy chairs, their faces beaming with the vicarious joy of the youth about them, father or an elder brother distributes the packages which are unwrapped, one by one, amid peals of delighted laughter. Then, in the warmth of a room smelling of resin, tallow, and cake, the children take turns reciting Christmas poems, singing carols and acting parts of Christmas pageants.

But hark — what's going on outside? Is that music? Quickly the window is flung open, and we find that our home is being serenaded by a group of carolers, or " star singers " as the Swiss call them from the fact that their leader carries a large white star shining with the light of a candle within. In the Middle Ages, when the custom originated, the " star singers " dressed in costumes representing Joseph, Mary, the shepherds, and the Magi, and the peasants believed that the houses where they stopped to sing would be blessed with happiness and prosperity in the coming year.

A lovely thought indeed, and one that should make us grateful. For who knows but what the old medieval belief was true? Perhaps our house, too, will be blessed with happiness and prosperity in the new year. And who knows indeed but what the blessings augured by these modern " star singers " may be even more inclusive in scope? Perhaps this song of the carolers may be echoed from our own house to others, and from them to still others, until all the world can share in this blessing of happiness and prosperity.

This year again, Christmas finds Swiss families reunited in the quiet and peace of their homes, giving thanks for the blessings of the day, the season, and the year. Above all else, on this birthday of the Prince of Peace, Swiss hearts are filled with the hope that the spirit of peaceful good-neighbourliness which has brought happiness to their land may soon bring peace and happiness to all the world.

[S.N.T.O.]

A NEW YEAR RESOLUTION:

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