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Merry Christmas in "the Olden Days"

By Marjorie Howe Dixon

Somehow to reread descriptions of Christmas as it was celebrated in the olden days, in years gone by, gives one a poignant sense of regret that those good old days are gone, never to return. Not that the present dear intimate and jolly Christmases haven't their compensations, but the old times were so picturesque, so quaint, so delightful.

Do you remember, why, of course you do, the thoroughly happy and hearty good time the Pickwickians enjoyed at Dingley Dell? Dickens presents there, from the moment of departing from London, taking the coach for the long drive to Manor Farm, to the breaking up of the merry party at leave-taking, a picture of the greatest charm, of old customs and old pleasures, that one longs to have been present himself.

The party of four Pickwickians, and Sam Weller, of course, left London early on the morning of December 22nd, all snugly stowed away on the top of the Muggleton coach, well wrapped in great coats, shawls and comforters. The air was sharp and frosty, and when it became necessary to stop at an inn where fresh horses were waiting, Mr. Pickwick and Mr. Tupman descended to get a warm drink at the tap within, and were all but left behind when the coach started: "dashing along the open road, with the fresh, clear air glowing in their faces and gladdening their very hearts within them."

On their arrival at the Blue Lion, they were met by Mr. Wardle's celebrated page. You can't have forgotten the fat boy, the lad with the amazing capacity for eating and sleeping. He and Sam arranged to drive to Dingley Dell with the luggage, while the other members of the party walked.

Off they started at a brisk pace and part way they were met by Mr. Wardle and a jolly party of young people, and, after the introductions were performed, they all trooped off to the house, the young ladies having all manner of difficulties getting over the stile, especially the black-eyed young lady in a very nice little pair of boots with fur round the top who was observed to scream very loudly when Mr. Winkle offered to help her over.

The next morning was the occasion of the wedding of Bella and Trundle, which took place in the parish church, all the Pickwickians appearing in most blooming array. It must have been very early indeed, for the whole party returned to breakfast. There Mr. Pickwick distinguished himself, with his usual genial manner making a speech of congratulation to the young bride and groom, and receiving in response a whirlwind of applause.

That night was the great event, the ball. It took place in the "best sitting room at Manor Farm. Seated in a shady bower of holly and evergreens were the two best fiddlers and the only harp in all Muggleton. The carpet was up, the candles burnt bright, the fire blazed and cracked on the hearth, and merry voices and light-hearted laughter rang through the room."

Mr. Pickwick amazed everyone by appearing in pumps ready to dance. And dance he did, with all his heart and soul, with the old lady at his side. In fact, after several couples had dropped out from sheer weariness, Mr. Pickwick was still dancing with undiminished vigor. Later a glorious supper followed.

The next night was Christmas Eve. Mr. Wardle's custom was to have games in the kitchen that night, with all the servants in. From the centre of the ceiling a huge branch of mistletoe was suspended, which gave "rise to a scene of general and most delightful struggling and confusion." Mr. Pickwick led the old lady under the mistletoe, and kissed her with great decorum, and a minute later was himself surrounded and kissed by all the younger ladies, in a laughing group.

They played old games, blind-man's buff and snap dragon, and ended with a huge bowl of wassail in which the hot apples were hissing and bubbling with a rich look and a jolly sound that were perfectly irresistible. Christmas carols burst forth from the merry group about the fireplace, to the particular delight of all the poor relations.

Wardle finished the evening with the story of the goblin who stole a sexton. Christmas dawned bright and cold. After breakfast the whole train went to church, where one of the medical students fell asleep. After lunch Wardle proposed a skating party. Winkle said he could skate, but when it came to displaying his ability, on the pond, he made such a lamentable failure, indeed, he couldn't stand alone on his skates, that Mr. Pickwick was very angry with him and scolded him roundly.

Sliding on the ice appealed to Mr. Pickwick strongly. Finally after several false starts he attempted it. What a jolly thud he had with Wardle, Sam, Mr. Tupman and Mr. Snodgrass in close succession; so close in fact that Mr. Pickwick was upset at least every third round.

Suddenly a sharp, smart crack was heard. A large mass of ice disappeared and Mr. Pickwick with it. All the ladies fainted promptly, and the men seemed bereft of their senses. In another moment Mr. Pickwick's head appeared, and someone recollected that the pond was nowhere more than five feet deep, everyone was much relieved. "Prodigies of valor were performed to get him out." All the ladies offered their shawls lest the poor dear catch his death of cold. Wrapped tightly in these, with Sam at his side, he ran back to the house, to be put immediately to bed. With the farm fire, and a bowl of punch besides, he awoke the next morning none the worse for the cold plunge.

The jolly party broke up the next morning. Mr. Pickwick and his friends once more took their seats on the top of the Muggleton coach after many a parting and whispering conversation with the young ladies. All were loth to depart. And, well they might be. We feel the same sharp regret ourselves that Dickens felt, the inevitable sadness of leave-taking. But there is always the comforting reflection that as another year rolls by, Christmas will come again and return to us its own merry times and renewed acquaintance with those we love.

CHRISTMAS CHIMES

The village chimes rang out a mellow strain clear and vibrant as golden beads dropped into a crystal dish, but Adam Marsh drew his worn fur cap down closer about his ears and scowlingly took a shortcut towards his desolate home.

He had neither chick nor child, only money. He hardened his soul against yuletide suggestions and tried to glory in scouting the humanizing influence of home, social friendship and "the folly called love!" Then he came to a sudden halt and sprang behind a tree. There was a light in the room where he slept. Against the lamp light there was outlined the figure of a roughly dressed man standing at an open bureau. Marsh stole to the kitchen, took down an ancient horse pistol, and gliding to the door of the lighted room, burst it in.

"What are you doing here?" he shouted out. "Hands up!" It was rather a weak than an evil face that confronted him. Its owner looked crestfallen, rather than sulen.

"I was looking for something to eat," he stammered out. "That's likely outside. Of the kitchen, isn't it now?" snarled Marsh derisively.

"Well then, finding nothing in the kitchen I hoped I could pick up some little trifle that would bring me a meal. Say, I'm not a genuine bad one. I never touched a cent that was not my own until this very day. And this has so shamed me, that all I ask is strength to carry back what I took."

"Yah!" jested Marsh. "Sort of robbing Peter to pay Paul, hey? Now then, I'll run no risks of your turning on me. Empty your pockets," and the man disgorged a rusted jackknife and something that glowed with the glint of gold. "Back to yonder corner," ordered Marsh angrily. "What's this?" and his nimble fingers clutched a locket and chain the other had placed on the table.

"It isn't yours, nor mine!" burst out the intruder. "Say, I must take that back where it belongs. Listen to me. It was ten miles down the road, in a wretched little hovel. In the front room was a pale, worried woman attending to her sick husband. In a back room was a little angel of a girl, asleep on a torn thin blanket. I noticed the chain and locket around the child's throat. I sneaked up and took it. I've a wife and two little tots in the city; lost my job and was tramping, looking for work. I was frantic as I thought of their wretched Christmas and I hurried away to sell the trinket and steal a ride home on the bunnet. Don't shoot!" for Marsh, opening the locket and scanning the portrait within shook from head to foot, and with glaring eyes viewed the locket as though it were some boddy wrath.

Ah! how it recalled to him the bright, sunny-faced daughter he had shut out from heart and home the day she eloped with Rodney Blair. He had never sought to learn of her fate. And now the locket she had worn he had strangely found, cherished and protected by her little child with his picture still in it.

"My man," he said "if you will take me to where you found the people you tell of, your dear ones shall have a Christmas, indeed." "I'll do that for nothing," half sobbed the penitent fellow.

Little Cora Blair was sobbing in her mother's arms as Adam Marsh reached the doorstep of the home of the unfortunates. He heard her say: "Oh mamma, can't we search for my pretty locket? Every night when I say my prayers and ask a blessing for the dear grandfather I have never seen. I shall miss seeing his picture, and—" "Merry Christmas, and—forgiveness!" spoke Adam Marsh, pushing the door open. "Alice, I've come to make up for my cruelty and neglect."

And when the penitent had faithfully returned from the village stores with a heaping basket full of Christmas cheer and gifts for the little one, Marsh had ordered, he started for the city with a warm snug roll of bank notes in his hand. "Now for my own home and the Merry Christmas of my dear ones!" he jubilated. "Oh, I'll never stray away from the straight path and them again," and in a wild ecstasy he sang in accord with the chiming bells: Peace on earth and good will towards all men!

MY WISH

I sent a note to Kris Kringle
And asked him please to come
This year to me on Christmas Eve
And bring a big red drum—
Some roller skates, a shiny sled—
A tree with candles bright,
A candy cane and big glass galls
That glisten in the light.

I hope old Santa Claus will get
And read the note I sent,
And that he will not think me bold
Nor selfish in intent:
Because I want to give the drum
To little brother Ned,
And Sister Sue I promised I'd
Take riding on the sled.

The skates I want for Cousin Frank
And all I want for me
Is just the fun of handing gifts
To them from off the tree.

Tommy—"Does your mamma ever whip you?"
Clarence—"No, but she does worse than that."
Tommy—"What does she do?"
Clarence—"Washes my neck every morning."



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Curious Xmas Characters

Continued from Page One.

An amusing tale is told of the lady Macella, wife of Sir Roger de Tichborne, who had been ill for some years. Realizing that she had not long to live, and knowing too the penurious leanings of her liege lord, she asked him for a small bequest, the privilege of leaving a dole of bread for all who should ask for it annually. The crafty Sir Rogers readily agreed, telling her that he would dedicate to her charity as much land as she could walk about over while a band of pine was burning. Thinking that his wife was so weakened by her long illness, he thought himself very clever in providing such an arrangement. The doughty old lady surprised him by several acres—twenty-three to be exact; for once she got going she seemed endowed with new strength. She took to her bed again and before her death she called her family to her side and pronounced a blessing upon them all so long as the charity was allowed to stand and she left maledictions to the seventh generation for any who should ever discontinue her good work. The acres she traversed produced nineteen hundred loaves of bread for the poor. Of late years it has been deemed wise to sell the produce and give the bread's equivalent in money.

Two wills of similar ideas were left by two well-known men of Wales. Each directed that every Christmas a number of prosperous men named in the will should purchase a stated number of real wheat loaves, take them to the tomb of the one who made the will and after a prayer, take them for distribution to the homes of the poor.

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