

Christmas Customs Around the World

Christmas is Festival Of Light in Sweden

By D. H. Wardle
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Winter and darkness prevail for many months in the Northern countries and this Christmas, at the turn of the year, has always had a special significance as a festival of light and tribute to the return of the sun. In Sweden it is more than a brief holiday; it is a lengthy festive season beginning with the celebration of "Lucia," the "return of Light" on December 13th and ending with "Candlemas" one month later.

In past centuries St. Lucia Day was likely the ceremonial conclusion of the seasons' threshing. Early in the 1600's is the first mention of St. Lucia, "The Queen of Light," being represented by a fair young girl with a crown of candles in her hair. First observed in the province of Varmland, "Lusseadagen" is now a popular tradition followed throughout the land. In homes, offices, workshops and hotels the prettiest and blondest girls chosen as Lucia, and in the early morning darkness, accompanied by her maids, she walks about clad in a white linen gown with a crown of lighted candles upon her head and a tray in her hands, serving coffee and cakes as she sings her carol to the tune of the old Italian ballad "Santa Lucia." Later in the evening, processions are arranged in the streets of many Swedish towns after the crowning of a Lucia Queen: the largest being held in Stockholm where thousands of people line the streets to see the fair Queen on her throne with her escort of pretty maids, pages and fairy figures. The substantial fund collected at these festivities goes to various charities.

One of the most colorful traditions of Sweden's Christmas season is the old-fashioned country fair which moves into the heart of the bustling Capital. Among the outstanding events in Stockholm before the 25th is the historical "Julmarknad," held in the old-time market place of the Old City, and flanked by quaint medieval buildings with their high-gabled facades aglow in the warm light of the towering Christmas tree. A similar fair, in a rural setting, is staged annually at Skansen, Stockholm's unique outdoor museum. The third big Yuletide fair is an indoor event held in the famous Town Hall of Stockholm, and sponsored by the local Home-crafts Association. On these occasions weavers and craftsmen from many parts of Sweden display their skill in spinning, weaving, wood-carving, basket-making and other time-honoured crafts. The products of their handicraft are auctioned off "country-style" to the eager public. In the stalls young girls in colourful provincial costumes offer for sale everything from straw animals and hand-dipped candles to hot "Glogg" and cotton candy. Country style music with singing and folk dancing lends additional authenticity to the old-world rural atmosphere. Yuletide imparts a peculiar charm to Swedish communities: darkness falls at about three o'clock in the afternoon, the walls are ablaze with light from innumerable electric decorations, shop-window displays and huge lighted Christmas trees glowing in the open spaces and squares. For a number of days before Christmas Eve the market places and public squares become veritable forests, with hundreds of Christmas tree vendors offering fragrant, fresh-cut trees to eager buyers, who scurry about laden with purchases made at the fairs. . . The Christmas goals of straw, angels with wood-shavings curls, hand-woven rug, etc.

The Little Straw Goat

The straw goat is a tradition that dates back to the Vikings and their god of fertility, Thor. To the people Thor gave full harvest, food, the fruit of the seasons, and wherever he travelled among the people he was drawn in a carriage by two goats. Thus he became associated with the ancient celebrations and gift-giving at the close of the threshing season. In the 1870's a Swedish artist began to depict the Christmas giver as an elfin-like sprite clad in a red pointed cap who gradually took on the appearance of the present-day Santa Claus. But the goats remained the same, and to this day Santa in Sweden is drawn about by the Christmas goat, and the goat, having (supposedly) delivered the gifts, stands at the foot of the Swedish Christmas tree.

Everyone in Sweden, even the poorest, has a Christmas tree whose candles burn for the first time on Christmas Eve. The tree is usually decorated with tiny Swedish flags, gingerbread men, tinsel and angels, goats, stars and other small figures made of straw. The highlight of the festivities comes on Christmas Eve. Unlike the Santa Claus of the Anglo-Saxon countries, Father Christmas in Sweden arrives on Christmas Eve, just after supper, to distribute his gifts, and is usually the father of the house in disguise. This tradition is of a later date, for it was not until the 18th century that Christmas presents began to take the place of New Year's gifts that were customary since early Christian times. The Swedish term "Julklapp" (which means loud bang) is connected with the manner in which

the gifts originally used to be delivered: a pounding was heard on the door, the gift wrapped heavily in paper, was thrown in on the floor, and the messenger would flee at top speed. Today Father Christmas himself (who is usually the father of the household in disguise) has a friendly chat with the children and then distributes the gifts. Before this ceremony, there is usually a pause in the festivities when the father reads the chapter in the Bible about the Nativity. Each gift is accompanied by a rhyme from the donor. Then follow a Christmas hymn and a dance around the tree in which all members of the household join.

On Christmas night man remembers the animals, and sheaves are placed at windows for the birds to feed on, and the cattle are given extra rations. Another custom linked with old Norse sagas is that of placing a bowl of rice pudding outside the house in order to remain on friendly terms with the gnomes of the neighborhood.

The Swedish Christmas table presents a lavish display. The main dishes are boiled ham, sausages of all kinds, pig's knuckles, "lute fish" and rice pudding. A good Christmas ale is also served.

Christmas Eve dinner is the traditional Christmas meal, and is served in an attractively-decorated kitchen where members of the household and servants gather together to partake of the numerous courses. The first course is "dopp vjartan", served on this occasion only. It consists of a spiced bouillion in which ham has been cooked. It is ladled from an iron pot that stands boiling on the stove, and each one present dips a slice of home-made rye bread into the pot and eats it. There follows the well-known "smorgasbord" consisting of many delicious tidbits, the main dish being a large ham decorated with frills of red and white tissue paper. The evening meal on this day consists of "lutefisk," a stock fish treated in lye (resembling our cod fish) which is served with melted butter or a cream sauce, and potatoes. Rice cooked in milk and eaten with cream, sugar and cinnamon forms the dessert. There is always much merriment in seeing who gets the "almond" in his plate of rice, for it is said that he who does will be married next.

"Julotta" Service
One of the great thrills of the Swedish Christmas is driving to early-morning church services at 5 o'clock. This service is called "Julotta." This is an extremely solemn occasion in small, centuries old provincial churches where people gather, often travelling many miles through the dark, snow-clad countryside. Their horse-drawn sleighs carry lighted torches, and the sleigh-bells ring out joyfully. After this Christmas Day service, the people gather outside the church to exchange greetings with the Swedish salutation "God Jul!" The remainder of Christmas Day is devoted to quiet home life, with a family gathering in the living room, where the members play games, chat and read, and enjoy the gifts they have received.

On the day after Christmas, which is also a holiday, the social season begins. The family circle is broken and people visit their friends and neighbors, wishing each other "A Happy Continuation of Christmas." Theaters and cinema are crowded, for some of the best films and plays of the season often hold their premieres on that day.

New Year's Day and New Year's Eve have no specifically Swedish characteristics, and are celebrated much the same as in other countries, with public and private parties, balls, fire-crackers, etc.

Finally on January 13th, St. Knut's Day, the Christmas season is ended with a series of lively children's parties when the tree is stripped of its finery and tossed into the back yard to the accompaniment of loud cheers and a "thanks for good service".

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combustible material had been tied, was carried in procession through the streets. About 8 o'clock in the evening the torches were lighted and, accompanied by the town band, the tree was carried in stately procession around the town. Rockets and squibs were discharged and many of the people also carried torches and lighted branches.

CAROLLING CHILDREN
The "milly-box," lined with sugar and oranges and containing two small figures, which still is occasionally carried by Yorkshire children when they go carol-singing from house to house on Christmas Eve, is a relic of the ancient custom, common in the northern countries of England until the close of the last century, of carrying figures of Our Lady and the Holy Child in procession with the carol singers. The word "milly" is a corruption of "My Lady." In



QUEEN VICTORIA'S CHRISTMAS TREE. The introduction of the Christmas Tree to England from Germany is largely due to the Prince Consort, who initiated the custom at Windsor in 1841. Now most British homes have their Christmas Tree, gaily decorated and hung with presents. Christmas Trees are first mentioned at Strasbourg in 1605, and Luther established the custom in Germany. —(Courtesy U. K. Information Service).

Christmas in Holland

Specially written for "The Guardian" by H. Muller

While in Canada Santa Klaus and Christmas are almost one conception, in The Netherlands there's quite a difference between the two . . . not only of time, but also of celebration. The Dutch Santa Klaus is a Spanish bishop, who every year at the fourth of December, arrives by steamboat from that southern country. Instead of a reindeer sleigh, he uses a white horse for transportation, after leaving the steamboat. He is accompanied by one or more black servants, who are all called "Black Pete," and who help him with his tremendous task of giving every one presents. With his horse, he rides over the roofs of the houses in every village, town or city, his servant descends through the chimneys and puts presents into the shoes the children have placed before the fireplace. These shoes are always filled with carrots, hay or sugar lumps, a reward for the horse who so infallibly takes his master on his hazardous trips.

The Dutch Santa Klaus time from the 5th to the 6th of December is a time for fun and laughter. People make surprise-packages for one another, and every present is accompanied by some poem or other which tells of the faults and peculiar habits the addressee has. But when Santa once more has left Spain to take a well-deserved rest over there, the Dutch start buying Christmas trees and decorations and settle down for the more serious way of celebration.

Christmas in Holland is not celebrated with much fun or presents—it is the time of devotion and of remembering the birth of Christ. In the churches, there are prayers for peace and goodwill all over the world, and at home the family gathers all by itself: it is strictly a family and indoor-affair. Christmas in Holland. The big day of the vacation isn't, like in Canada, the 25th, but the 24th. Christmas Eve is the most important event of the whole celebration, on that evening, every one in The Netherlands is at home—the streets are deserted and when you walk through them, you can see a tree with real candles in every house, and sometimes hear the Christmas songs. In the top of the tree, there is a big silver star, symbolizing the Star of Bethlehem.

Under the tree, there mostly is to be found a miniature copy of the stable where Jesus was born—with the donkey and oxen, the three Kings and Maria herself with her Son. The tree is decorated with silver balls, bells and garlands, also mostly silver, some use

red and other colors also. Now, on this night, the whole family is sitting by the tree and one of the parents, preferably the mother, reads out the Christmas Story. The only light in the room is given by the candles, and the atmosphere is sober and solemn. Not many presents are given any more, some may be under the tree, but the highlight of the whole celebration is on this night. Not many will forget the sight of their mother, reading out the story of the birth of Christ, the serene candle light and the feeling everything was good and peaceful, then.

On the 26th, most people go to church, and spend the rest of the day together at home, there is a dinner with goose or chicken the turkey-tradition we know so well here isn't very well known in The Netherlands. The last day of the holiday is often spent visiting relatives and friends, wishing them a merry Christmas. Often people dine out this day—a habit which isn't so popular as in Canada. . . nearly every Dutchman eats at home as a rule.

The tree stays after New Year, which is also celebrated at home and in the family, but will always be out of the house before Twelfth Night. An old superstition, which is generally followed, says bad luck will come over the dwelling when the tree is still in there after Twelfth Night.

My Christmas List

Some little things for loved ones small,
A teddy bear, a sleeping doll,
To make their hearts glad, one and all,
Just what they need for Christmas.

As down the busy street I go,
There is always a kindness I can do,
I can lend a hand, give a smile or two,
There's so much to do at Christmas.

The cost of these I shall not mind,
Loving to give, brings peace of mind,
Contentment too, therein I'll find,
If, I give from my heart at Christmas.

One thing I need, I cannot buy,
As Christmas day again draws nigh,
The love of Him, who is born to-day,
It's my greatest need for Christmas.

—M. J.

Nativity Scene Placed Under Christmas Tree

Compiled by the
Legation of Switzerland, Ottawa.

Christmas is celebrated in Switzerland in about the same manner as in Canada. Although Christmas is a religious celebration, it is also the time of year when children as well as adults are showered with gifts.

The Christmas festivities start on Christmas Eve when Christians celebrate the birth of Christ by going to church. Afterwards, families gather together at home around the Christmas tree, which is ornamented with small wax candles instead of coloured lights, and sing Christmas carols and listen to recitations by the children. There is practically no danger in using candles, as they are only lit when the families and friends are present. In most Catholic homes, a crib depicting the story of the Nativity is set up under the Christmas tree.

In families where there are children, Santa Claus, who is usually a friend or relative of the family, arrives on Christmas Eve in the traditional costume and distributes the toys and gifts, which are immediately unwrapped. After the gifts have been opened, a midnight supper is enjoyed by

ages), vegetables of all kinds, cakes and pastries, fruits, nuts and chocolate and Swiss white and red dry wines.

On Christmas Day, religious services are held in all churches. Only few people exchange Christmas greetings cards but most send good wishes cards on the occasion of the New Year.

THE "SANTONS"

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one should say not only the father and mother and children, but often aunts, uncles and cousins, with the party taking place, if possible, at the home of the grandparents. This supper is a light one, usually with plenty of oysters, followed by a light oven dish cheese, fruit and coffee. At midnight the whole family is at Mass, and Following this ceremony in the church the "revelion", or Christmas dinner is held.

In some families the revelion is merely a light supper, but more often it is a regular Christmas dinner, and everybody is up until five or six in the morning, the children dropping off to sleep as they become sleepy.

The following morning the children eagerly seek their shoes to see what Pere Noel has left. But, generally speaking, children do not

In Belgium December Is The Children's Month

This is the children's month, the month of family holidays, banquets and abundant libations.

The preparations for the approaching Christmas and the New Year's Day Revelion are made long in advance, and Saint Nicholas serves as the children's prelude to the family festivities. It would be interesting to study the evolution of toys throughout the ages, and the sudden changes wrought in them by the coming of the railroad, the automobile, and the airplane. However, these changes are only imaginary, for a toy is, after all, everything except what is supposed to be, a thing conceived by an adult, a concrete thing so precise and complicated that it does not usually become interesting until the gears are jammed, the wheels broken and the mechanism ruined. Actually, toys have a soul, breathed into them by the children, and this soul is always the same, whether it be in a doll, a locomotive, or a broom. Thus, the styles are changed in vain, for the child always seeks and finds one thing: the spring-

board for his dreams, the pretext for creating, just a bit more cleverly, the realm into which no one can penetrate, no one but himself and his brother, the poet, who will go on with the game when the children have grown to men. This, of course, is a fact recognized by the bakers and candymakers who dip their illusory sweets in dream-colored syrups.

In Western Europe, Saint Nicholas' Day, December 6th, has remained the great day for the children; not even Christmas has been able to replace it. Saint Nicholas, a dignified saint who wears a bishop's robe and mitre, white gloves, and an enormous bishop's ring on his left hand, which bewitches every small soul, brings toys and sweets to fill the little wooden shoes in chateaux and cottages alike. Between Saint Nicholas' Day, and Christmas there is an interruption which helps to prolong the happiness associated with the white-bearded saint and to anticipate with less impatience the somewhat less spontaneous joy of Christendom's greatest holiday.

The 21st, Saint Thomas' Day, brings the above-mentioned interruption. In former times, in the Ardennes, the schoolboys would set fire to little paper roosters, placed before the door of the school building. This apparently innocent custom is, according to some historians, a survival of the

receive anything like the number of gifts that children in North America have come to expect. There is little exchange between persons other than members of the family. A quiet family day follows, with perhaps a trip to a children's theatre (in Paris or the large cities) in the afternoon.

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Devil's Knoll Tolls Every Christmas Eve, Is Legend of Dewsbury, Yorkshire Village

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Cleveland, Yorkshire, the same great dearth of cattle and beasts at sunset "it signifies dearth to this year." And if the wind arose some among the kings and great lords.

THE CHRISTMAS CRACKER

As in Canada, no Christmas party in Britain is complete without a box of "crackers." Christmas crackers were first made in Britain about 70 years ago. It was a confectioner and maker of ornaments of wedding cakes with the typical English name of Tom Smith who brought back from a holiday on the Continent the idea which evolved into the cracker. He saw that a French confectioner made his sweets more attractive by wrapping them in tissue, a few weeks before Christmas he set his assistants wrapping sugared almonds in this way. The cracker came a little nearer when he thought of making the package more entertaining by placing a loving message inside.

HOLY NIGHT WEATHER

Country people in Britain still watch the sky on Christmas Day for signs of a change in the weather, for there is an ancient belief that the weather at this time is a strong portent for that to come throughout the year. "Wise and cunning masters of astrology," we are told, "have found that a man may see and mark for the weather for Holy Night how the whole year after shall be." When Christmas night was clear and starry, it was taken that the year's crop of fruit and wine would be a plentiful one. On the other hand, if Christmas night was foul and windy, the year to come would be "very scant of wine and fruit." But if the wind arose at the rising of the sun then "it betokeneth