

Prior to the service in the Abbey, there was a parade of two hundred and fifty members of the Q.A.R.A.N.C., with an attachment of fifty R.A.M.C. and the R.A.M.C. band. They assembled at Waterloo Place at 10.30 a.m., opposite the statue of Florence Nightingale, where a wreath was laid by the Matron-in-Chief and Director of Army Nursing Services, Brigadier Dame Helen Gillespie, R.R.C., O.H.N.S.

The parade was headed by Lt. Col. S. E. Hughes, R.R.C., Commandant, Depot and Training Establishment Q.A.R.A.N.C.

Christmas.

*"On the first day of Christmas
My true-love sent to me,
A partridge in a pear-tree!"*

CHRISTMAS HOLDS a special significance for each of us; the time, when our thoughts instinctively turn towards loved ones, it serves to unite us, one race with another, throughout the world—it bridges the gulf between loneliness and friendship. In the twilight of life, it revives mellowed memories of Yuletides long ago, and for the sentimentalists it recaptures that old nostalgia, from which we never wish to escape, to the young, it opens the door to a world of wonderment, of sparkling tinsel, bright holly berries, of mistletoe, apples and nuts and those irresistible crackers, which never yield more than a penny whistle and a motto, but which, nevertheless, all add to the gaiety of Christmas, together with countless joys which serve to make the season one worthy of remembrance.

It would be a forlorn world, indeed, in which to find anyone to whom Christmas does not bring a small measure of happiness, and how wonderful it is to realise that it matters not what our race or creed, we all know and understand the Christmas story, each community, however large or small, celebrating this season in its own customary way.

It is one anniversary in the year, to which we all look forward, and it brings in its stride a feeling of goodwill towards our fellow-men. It will ever remain the season for giving and receiving, traditionally the time when servants partook of the good things their masters enjoyed throughout the year, and symbolic, too, of the offerings of the Three Wise Men to the Holy Babe.

The "white" Christmas, known to us in this country, provides a far more seasonal atmosphere than the weather of warmer climates—South Africa and such-like. Although Christmas is kept in much the same way, the fact remains that the Summer weather inevitably alters the true character of festivities. There is, too, the noticeable absence of holly and mistletoe and in the place of the Christmas-tree, pine trees are decorated instead. Nevertheless, the cards remain the same, gay with robins and holly—things which can seldom, if indeed ever—have been seen and enjoyed by the vast majority there.

One important custom that remains universal is the heralding of Christmas with the arrival on Christmas Eve of Santa Claus—that figure beloved by all children, with his reindeer-drawn sleigh and tinkling bells—bringing his bag of toys and sweets down the chimney, to fill the empty stockings with the "goodies" of Christmas—that is, providing the children are good and well-behaved. Here again, different countries vary

the custom and in France, while most children are never forgotten, bundles of switches are left on the hearth for the bad boys and girls, being brought not by Bonhomme Noel, but his companion Pere Fonettard. Another French tradition is that of keeping part of the Yule-log throughout the year, to ensure bountiful crops, and protect the home against fire.

Food, too, is necessarily in keeping with the season, and Christmas dishes are many and varied. It is interesting to note that in Sweden particular attention is applied to the laying of an additional table, so that the spirits of the dead may also partake of the meal, while in Germany it is the Virgin Mary and her attendant angels who come to eat, a customary fostering of goodwill towards ancestral and other spirits to ensure that the following year will yield of its best.

Another delightful tradition is that of decorating the Christmas-tree, and the placing of the symbolic Star of Bethlehem at the top, followed by final dressing of the tree with tinsel, small gifts and lights—a reflection perhaps, on the Jewish Feast of Lights which also occurs at this time.

The singing of carols is ages-old, one of the first collections being printed in 1521. Wassails are, however, of pre-Christian origin, and were traditionally executed by waits begging for Christmas Charity at great houses, or by costumed merrymakers bearing a large bowl decorated with ribbons. The proceedings were usually ended with wishes of good luck for the master and his household, and were, in turn, extended to his herds and crops also.

During the reign of Good Queen Bess, it was common enough to see the happy bands of carollers a-wassailling through the streets during the nights of Christmas, but unfortunately this was eventually abused, and became a pretext for collecting money, the one purpose for which it was never originally intended. In 1647, the Puritan Parliament abolished Christmas observance, and forbade any form of celebration, but despite their temporary disappearance many of the earlier carols were subsequently recovered during the 19th Century.

These stories in verse are many, and hail from almost every country—the most common depicting the visiting of the Child born in a manger—neighbourly goodwill prevails and each visitor, according to his trade and means, brings the gift most suitable to the Child Jesus. Dutch carols—hailing from a country rich in dairy farming—have as their theme the giving of new milk or butter, while the Czech contribution is that of a fur coat to protect the Holy Babe from the chill December wind, others offer eggs, cheese, a ball and so on.

Thus the "Twelve days of Christmas" is a celebration worthy of its origin, and in our happiness at this time, let us remember and appreciate its true meaning, with the crib, the ox and ass symbolising that other Christmas so long ago; a story so old, and yet ever new; so wonderful that it will never cease to be, but will be passed on to each generation.

When the time comes, may it be joyous and memorable—"there is some bad in the best of us, and yet some good in the worst of us"—but no matter how great or how humble, may the Spirit of Christmas remain forever in your heart.

"God Bless us—every one."

DOROTHY RICHARDS.

[previous page](#)

[next page](#)