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HOW BABES BRING BETHLEHEM TO THE LAND OF THE MISTRAL

Bethlehem in the Land of the Mistral! Well—and can you call a Christmas spent in that ancient district South France by any other name? True, there is the solemn ceremony of the great supper, when the prevailing table rule is kindness and not one hasty or angry word maybe spoken, all emitties risen in the preceding twelve months are just as though they had never been. And there is the no less solemn rite of lighting the big Christmas log in the enormous hearth (le trefoir, they call this specially-cut log). And the spiced vin cuit is drunk in fitting moderation—and fried cod and rich nougat are eaten in abundance. But these are just detail.

Creche is the Centre of All The centre of all Christmas home festivities in this Land of the Mistral—the cold wind from the Alps—is the ever-abiding memory of the Gentle Child. And they interpret this memory into something vivid and tangible and frequently quite artistic. Not the poorest farmhouse in the district but manages to get its very own little creche.

And what a creche! For weeks ahead the household arranges all the necessary details, and the father will travel to Marseilles to get the Santons (the Orb figures) at the Christmas fair there. The Santons, made of earthenware and carefully colored, may appear crude, but how expressive they are! The kneeling Mother in her pale blue cloak; the grave face of St. Joseph, bending over the holy crib; the radiance around the Blessed Baby; the wondrous ornaments of the Kings, each with a miniature golden casket in his hands; the worshipping shepherds, their tiny staves a real marvel of carved detail; and in the background the patient oxen silhouetted against the dark wall of the cave, a lamb or two lying in the hay, and sometimes a silver-winged angel or two invisibly suspended from the ceiling.

A chreche, as such, no novelty to a Catholic. But here is the Mistral land it assumes a meaning all its own, not the least significant thing about it that the grouping and arranging are invariably entrusted to the baby of the family. The grown-up folks certainly help in the construction of the rudely timbered "cave," but the "real" work is always done by baby hands.

Labour of Baby Hands It is a touching sight to watch tiny clumsy fingers busy over the precious "Santons" quite a week before Christmas Eve. Santons must never be dropped on the floor, nor are they to be handled lightly or carelessly, for they are put there in honor of our petit Jesus.

And on Christmas Eve, when the supper is over, when the huge hearth is ablaze with fruit tree logs, and candles are put out one by one, the whole family will stand grouped

around the presepi and a soft Christmas carol will break the momentary hush. It is then that you feel most what the Bethlehem story means to these simple folk. A sophisticated artist may dismiss the Santons and the "presepi" arranged by baby hands with a condemnatory shrug. A lightly-minded person might fancy all this nonsense, and a sceptical scholar might murmur some inaudible absurdity about the lingering relics of paganism.

And yet those who care, anyway? As an old Provençal farmer told me once: "Grude these Santons may be, and the colors are just a bit too strong (that particular creche boasted a prevailing note of bright saffron!) but Christmas would lack something without our 'presepi' right here in our home."

Childlike Spirit Over All That was what I felt, too. Not the workmanship of the Santons, but the childlike spirit behind them mattered. You just knew that the whole story of Bethlehem lay unfolded before you, simple as the Bethlehem reality had been simple.

And after the hush, they all sang "Noel" and baby hands lit the tiny wax candles, stuck in a neat row all along the edge of the "presepi," and baby voices chanted a Happy Christmas to the Baby King.

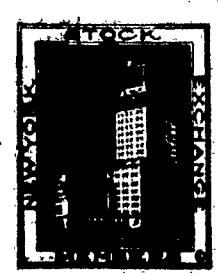
Then the children of the village church rounded up of the Midnight Mass, and, all the candles extinguished, we sallied forth, the most important Santon in the creche reverently carried to church by the youngest child in the family.

Such a very simple Christmas setting they have in this South France wood and hay and lavishly-used paint—and how much meaning there is not a child you meet in the whole district but does not know the great Bethlehem story down to the minutest detail.

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Pious Derivation of Santa Claus And Toy-Giving

Santa Claus, as he is known throughout America—a fat, genial soul pictured in the famous poem, "Twas the Night Before Christmas"—and in Europe as a saint with a bundle of toys, comes originally from an authentic saint of the Church, Saint Nicholas, Archbishop of Myra. Saint Nicholas lived in the Fourth Century and has been honored with great veneration in both the Greek and Latin churches for many ages.

The idea of connecting this saint with the dreams of childhood and the bestowal of gifts derives from the fact that Saint Nicholas really is really known as the patron of children, having from infancy exhibited great virtue and childlike humility, which he retained throughout life, and during his greatest consolation in the bestowal of alms and in assisting the poor.

Throughout Russia, Greece and Catholic Europe Saint Nicholas is revered, and throughout America and the northern countries he is likewise venerated in the person of Santa Claus, a corruption of the name Saint Nicholas pronounced rapidly.

His feast day falls on December 6. Till the tenth century counted, in papal reckoning, as the beginning of the ecclesiastical year, as it still does in Bulgaria.

Crib's True Place in Catholic Home

Although in most non-Catholic countries the central symbol of the Christmas season in the home is the Christmas tree, this is not the case in Catholic countries, where the family gathers about the hearth upon which is the truly Christmas symbol, the Crib of Bethlehem. There is often a Christmas tree to be sure, but it is only an accessory.

The Crib calls forth the best efforts of the family in decorating the home. Frequently tiny candles are burned about the straw bed of the Christ Child, and there are Mary and Joseph and the wise men of the East. The family gifts in Catholic homes also are placed about the crib to indicate that the Christ Child, rather than Santa Claus, is the real giver.

The old Christmas carol beginning "God rest you merry gentlemen, Let nothing you dismay," is traditional, having come down to us from an unknown source. From the language, however, it appears to have been written at the end of the 17th or beginning of the 18th century. The words have been set to present-day music by a modern composer.

Christmas Eve

Pine-crowned hills against the sky,
 Kneeling low to pray;
 Friendly, lamp-lit villages
 Along the snowbound way;
 Myriads of silver stars
 Gleaming softly bright—
 Little King of Bethlehem,
 I see Thy star tonight!
 —Australian Advocate.

Christmas Preserves Old Lay Privilege

The vigil of Christmas is one of the few in which the laity participate. In the ancient Church, all the greater feasts were preceded by vigils, when the faithful kept in the church, spending the night in fasting and prayer. But for grave reasons this custom was abolished among the laity, and the observance of vigils in the proper sense was restricted to the religious Orders.

Among the laity a vigil is now merely an ordinary fasting-day. That of Christmas, however, has been preserved, and so today the faithful meet in the church, as in olden times, to assist at the singing of the divine office and at the sacrifice of the Mass, which is offered after midnight.

The famous Christmas hymn "Adeste Fideles" is said to have been written in the 17th century. Authorities believe, however, that this and other popular airs, and even the words, must have existed long before they were put down in writing.

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