***Christmas Tree***

The Christmas tree that now spreads its lighted and decorated branches every year in so many different countries came originally from Germany. How long it has been known there is uncertain. The first definite mention of it dates only from the early seventeenth century, but it is probable that it existed in some form or another well before that time. The early trees apparently had no candles; but from the middle of the eighteenth century onwards, candles are frequently mentioned, and it is hard to believe that so lovely an adornment could ever have been omitted once it had been introduced. The first English example of a Christmas Tree of which we have a precise record was one arranged by a German member of Queen Caroline’s household for a children’s party in 1821. This, although the giver called it a tree, was actually a branch of evergreen fixed on a board, decorated with gilt oranges and almonds, and having a model farm, complete with animals, round its base.

In 1841 Queen Victoria and Prince Albert had a lighted tree, the first of many, at Windsor Castle. The event was widely reported, naturally. In the next few years, accounts and pictures of successive royal trees in the Castle appeared in newspapers and journals, and doubtless helped to make the custom better known. The royal trees at Windsor made the Christmas Tree fashionable; and if for a few years still ordinary people tended to think of it as a foreign importation – “the new Germany toy”, as Dickens called it in 1850 – by the late ‘sixties it was already a familiar sight in most parts of the country, and was slowly but surely replacing the older, native Kissing-Bough.

This was a garland of greenery which hung from the middle of the ceiling in the main living-room. It was shaped like a double-hoped May-garland, or like a crown, and it was adorned with candles, red apples, rosettes of coloured paper, and ornaments of various kinds. The most important item was a bunch of mistletoe suspended from the center. In some districts, where the plant was scarce, the bunch was omitted, and the Bough itself was called “the mistletoe”. The candles were ceremonially lit on Christmas Eve and every night thereafter during the Twelve days of Christmas. Throughout of festival, the Kissing-Bough was the glowing center of the family rejoicings, under which carols were sung, games were played, and kisses were exchanged in the mistletoe’s shadow. These lovely garlands are still to be seen in some English homes, either as an ornamental accompaniment to the Christmas Tree, or instead of it. They are, however, fairly rare now, and in the majority of households the Teutonic tree has gained so firm a hold that its native predecessors have been almost entirely forgotten.

In recent times the Christmas Tree has spread outwards from the home into the churches and the streets. Tall fir trees, ablaze with lights that are now usually electric, can be seen in churches of many different denominations, standing in the nave or at the west end, and sometimes outside in the churchyard. Anonymous gifts are often piled up round them for the inmates of hospitals and orphanages. Many towns also have a communal tree, round which carol-services are often held, in some square or park, or outside the Town Hall. Many English towns now have these communal trees, the most famous being that which, since 1947, the citizens of Oslo regularly give to the citizens of London. Immensely tall and brilliantly illuminated, it stands every year in Trafalgar Square, close to Nelson’s monument. A charming allied custom that is becoming increasingly common is the setting up of small decorated and lighted trees in the gardens of roadside houses, where they can be seen and their beauty shared by all who pass by.

*(A Dictionary of British Folk Customs by Christina Hole)*

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