RESCUING OUR NATIONAL FESTIVALS: BY JACOB RIIS

Dusk and darkness met on Christmas Eve a band of scarlet-clad mummers appeared in the streets of Richmond Hill in the Borough of Queens singing old-time carols. They carried Mediæval lanterns on long sticks and the crimson of their robes and their caps made vivid contrast with the deep snow. Wherever they passed curtains were drawn back and candles were lit in windows until the quiet streets shone with light. If the house harbored one shut in by reason of illness or age, the Christmas waifs halted there and sang “Noel” or “Silent Night, Holy Night,” breaking into the joyous strains of “O, Come All Ye Faithful” as they went on their way. They were neighbors bringing Christmas cheer to friends.

Three Yule-tides had found them thus “singing in” the holy season as harbingers of a better day, and this time their promise came true. In the same hour, even as their voices were raised in the little town a half score miles away, there shone out in Madison Square, in the heart of New York, a new star that was hailed with a fanfare of trumpets and the jubilant acclaim of thousands gathered about the people’s first outdoor Christmas tree. A veritable giant it was from the deep Adirondack forests, with the snow on its branches as if it had never left its home there, and as the radiance of the star grew at its very top, sixty feet above the ground, the music swelled louder and chorus after chorus fell in singing the dear old songs, red lights and green lights blossomed on every bough, and up from the crowd went a sigh of content and admiration. Such a tree no one had ever seen before.

Gifts there were none on its branches, but the tree itself was the greatest of Christmas gifts to the metropolis. Its message sank deep. When the singers had gone home in the midnight hour and the breadline of cold and hungry men was growing, farther down Broadway, several new-comers were noticed there, men and women in great fur coats that hid their faces and with a sack between them from which came forth bright and shining half dollars, one for every aching empty pocket. Instead of bread and coffee, the homeless ones had turkey
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and mince pie, all they could eat, and when the supply of help ran short, the fur-clad visitors helped wait upon the shivering file. Perhaps they saw, some of them, the great tree in their dreams that night and made out its trail of neighborly good will. What happier gift could Christmas have bestowed upon any one?

It was a woman’s heart that saw the vision of the Christmas tree. Mrs. J. B. F. Herreshoff proposed it, the Adirondack Club sent the tree, a whole railroad put its shoulder under the transportation problem and solved it, willing hands set it up in the square, and the Edison Company lighted it and kept it lighted for the children of New York clear till New Year. Doubtless it was the first of many great Christmas trees in America—indeed, it was born a twin: its sister grew that same night in the Boston Common—but it was more than that: it was a milestone marking a new appreciation of the holidays that we have all longed for, even if we didn’t know it. The campaign for early shopping has borne fruit; the post office records the welcome fact. The clerks and salesmen are at last to know the holiday; Santa Claus, too. His recent burdens have almost broken his back; but now the Society for the Prevention of Useless Giving, dubbed “the Spugs” by the popular wit, is rolling up membership like a snowslide. Sentiment and good sense have made common cause. “More and more,” said a hotel proprietor, “Christmas is becoming a home day.” Then let us all be glad, for so only does it come to its rights. It is the story-tellers of the home-loving peoples, Hans Christian Andersen and Charles Dickens, who saw its poetry and helped to make all the world love it.

The new note rang through the country. In St. Louis society men and women led bands of little carolers through the streets singing for the benefits of the waifs of the Children’s Aid Society, and warmed many hearts. The smoky old town never had so happy a night. In a score of smaller towns, East and West, the Christmas waits held their entry. Sometimes they sang to the people in their homes, sometimes in jails, in hospitals and in almhouses on Christmas morning. In Boston, where the waits have had their abode for a generation, Beacon Hill blazed out in lights and song on the Holy Eve in response to this invitation of the Christmas Committee:

Then be ye glad, good people,
This night of all the year,
And light ye up your candles,
For His star it shineth clear.

A famous physician led the carolers to the Christmas tree. But it
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was the city by the Hudson that set the pace, and on New Year's Eve it took another and longer step to clinch the matter for all time.

New York’s manner of speeding the old year and welcoming the new had become a reproach to civilization. A generation ago the fashion yet lingered of gathering on lower Broadway and listening to the chimes of Old Trinity in the midnight hour. Then some one brought along a tin horn, and now it is twenty years since any one has heard the New Year's chimes. In the wake of the all-pervading tin horn came a hoodlumism that made the evening a nightmare. Uptown, along the Great White Way, scenes were witnessed that were not good to look at, but all the world did come from far and near to look at what it was told was New York; to see the champagne, or what passed for it, spilled like water and to hear the cry echoing through the streets “To hell with the old year, hooray for the new.” The thing had grown to be an offense against good manners and common decency. The police were powerless to stop it. If it were to be changed, the initiative must proceed from the people themselves.

As nineteen hundred and twelve drew to a close a committee of well-known citizens was quietly formed to enter a protest on behalf of the real New York. They knew better than to forbid the revelry, even if that could have been done. They put themselves into touch with the churches and the great singing societies of the city and obtained permits to hold meetings in the City Hall Park, Madison Square, Union Square and Herald Square, all along Broadway from Newspaper Row to Thirty-fifth street. And to these centers they summoned their singers, giving notice to the public that they proposed to sing in the New Year, and expected New York to join them.

The idea caught the public as they expected. What money was needed to pay for bands, etc., poured in. Three wealthy men sent checks for five hundred dollars each, and enough and to spare was obtained in a week. The year went out in a blaze of sunlight. California has no balmier skies than had New York on New Year's Eve. The streets were filled with an amazing throng. The children danced around the shining tree, for the snow had all melted and the turf underfoot was soft and springy as in early spring. When the hands of the clock in the great tower overlooking the square pointed to eleven, a multitude of eighty thousand camped on lawn and sidewalk and street. The children slept comfortably on the benches surrounding the Christmas tree, their elders seemingly loath to take them home.

The blare of a brass band and a thousand voices joining in the Battle Hymn of the Republic: “Mine eyes have seen the glory of the coming of the Lord” awoke them to the most exciting hour of their brief lives. Before the chorus had half finished the second verse: “I
have seen Him in the watch fires of a hundred circling camps;” scattered groups joined them throughout the vast throng, and presently they all sang together. The braying of tin horns on Broadway ceased and men and women passing up and down with the human tide took up snatches of the song with some of the old war-time fervor. Soon the whole great Square sang and yet the effect was no such swelling chorus as its projectors had had in mind. One might be in the very midst of it all and yet hardly be able to say that he heard the people sing. Rather, one felt it and was irresistibly impelled to sing too. Nor was it that the volume of sound was drowned in the other voices of the night. Standing upon the platform, one caught something of it all; down among the people only the voices of those close by were heard and they conveyed no sense of the mighty rhythm. It was rather a feeling of being part of a great common purpose that swayed all alike. The sound itself was more like the deep undertone of the Horseshoe Falls one hears over and through the crash and clatter of the nearer Niagara when standing on the American side and listening to the majesty of its music. To some it brought an over-powering sense of solemnity. One felt it even among the throbbing automobiles that encircled the square as a huge wagon corral around an encamped army.

“O God our help in ages past” sang the great chorus. Then came the familiar strains of Auld Lang Syne. It was like bidding goodbye to an old friend and for once the thousands of voices blended into one and were heard. In the hush that followed, the clear notes of a trooper’s trumpet sounded “Taps” as the old year went out. “America” hailed the new; the mighty crowd scattered, singing still.

In the other squares the same scenes were enacted, with crowds smaller only because there was less room. The Salvation Army had withdrawn its troops from all the watch-night meetings throughout the city and camped in Union Square under the personal command of Commander Eva Booth. Everywhere the attitude of the people was orderly, even reverential. The very agitation for a decent New Year’s Eve had borne fruit. The newspapers recorded the fact unanimously that New York had not in many years been so well-behaved in spite of the fact that no such multitude had ever been abroad before. The tin horns were there and the old turmoil as the clock struck twelve, but the aggravating challenge had departed from their bray. Something had come into the hour which even they instinctively respected. In the early morning hours the police had their hands full as of old. But the moral protest had been registered, and the people’s temper proved.