



The First New England Christmas

*from the book
"Everyday Life in the Colonies"
by Stone & Frickett*

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THE FIRST NEW ENGLAND CHRISTMAS

From Stone and Fickett's "Every Day Life in the Colonies"

It was a warm and pleasant Saturday--that twenty-third of December, 1620. The winter wind had blown itself away in the storm of the day before, and the air was clear and balmy. The people on board the Mayflower were glad of the pleasant day. It was three long months since they had started from Plymouth, in England, to seek a home across the ocean. Now they had come into a harbour that they named New Plymouth, in the country of New England.

Other people called these voyagers Pilgrims, which means wanderers. A long while before, the Pilgrims had lived in England; later they made their home with the Dutch in Holland; finally they had said goodbye to their friends in Holland and in England, and had sailed away to America.

There were only one hundred and two of the Pilgrims on the Mayflower, but they were brave and strong and full of hope. Now the Mayflower was the only home they had; yet if this weather lasted they might soon have warm log-cabins to live in. This very afternoon the men had gone ashore to cut down the large trees.

The women of the Mayflower were busy, too. Some were spinning, some knitting, some sewing. It was so bright and pleasant that Mistress Rose Standish had taken out her knitting and had gone to sit a little while on deck. She was too weak to face rough weather, and she wanted to enjoy the warm sunshine and the clear salt air. By her side was Mistress Brewster, the minister's wife. Everybody loved Mistress Standish and Mistress Brewster, for neither of them ever spoke unkindly.

The air on deck would have been warm even on a colder day, for in one corner a bright fire was burning. It would seem strange now, would it

not, to see a fire on the deck of a vessel? But in those days, when the weather was pleasant, people on shipboard did their cooking on deck.

The Pilgrims had no stoves, and Mistress Carver's maid had built this fire on a large hearth covered with sand. She had hung a great kettle on the crane over the fire, where the onion soup for supper was now simmering slowly.

Near the fire sat a little girl, busily playing and singing to herself. Little Remember Allerton was only six years old, but she liked to be with Hannah, Mistress Carver's maid. This afternoon Remember had been watching Hannah build the fire and make the soup. Now the little girl was playing with the Indian arrowheads her father had brought her the night before. She was singing the words of the old psalm:

"Shout to Jehovah, all the earth,
Serve ye Jehovah with gladness; before
Him bow with singing mirth."

"Ah, child, methinks the children of Old England are singing different words from those to-day," spoke Hannah at length, with a faraway look in her eyes.

"Why, Hannah? What songs are the little English children singing now?" questioned Remember in surprise.

"It lacks but two days of Christmas, child, and in my old home everybody is singing Merry Christmas songs."

"But thou hast not told me what is Christmas!" persisted the child.

"Ah, me! Thou dost not know, 'tis true. Christmas, Remember, is the birthday of the Christ-Child, of Jesus, whom thou hast learned to love," Hannah answered softly.

"But what makes the English children so happy then? And we are English, thou hast told me, Hannah. Why don't we keep Christmas, too?"

"In sooth we are English, child. But the reason why we do not sing the Christmas carols or play the Christmas games makes a long, long story,

Remember. Hannah cannot tell it so that little children will understand. Thou must ask some other, child."

Hannah and the little girl were just then near the two women on the deck, and Remember said:

"Mistress Brewster, Hannah sayeth she knoweth not how to tell why Love and Wrestling and Constance and the others do not sing the Christmas songs or play the Christmas games. But thou wilt tell me wilt thou not?" she added coaxingly.

A sad look came into Mistress Brewster's eyes, and Mistress Standish looked grave, too. No one spoke for a few seconds, until Hannah said almost sharply:

"Why could we not burn a Yule log Monday, and make some meal into little cakes for the children?"

"Nay, Hannah," answered the gentle voice of Mistress Brewster. "Such are but vain shows and not for those of us who believe in holier things. But," she added, with a kind glance at little Remember, "wouldst thou like to know why we have left Old England and do not keep the Christmas Day? Thou canst not understand it all, child, and yet it may do thee no harm to hear the story. It may help thee to be a brave and happy little girl in the midst of our hard life."

"Surely it can do no harm, Mistress Brewster," spoke Rose Standish, gently. "Remember is a little Pilgrim now, and she ought, methinks, to know something of the reason for our wandering. Come here, child, and sit by me, while good Mistress Brewster tells thee how cruel men have made us suffer. Then will I sing thee one of the Christmas carols."

With these words she held out her hands to little Remember, who ran quickly to the side of Mistress Standish, and eagerly waited for the story to begin.

"We have not always lived in Holland, Remember. Most of us were born in England, and England is the best country in the world. 'Tis a land to be proud of, Remember, though some of its rulers have been wicked and cruel.

"Long before you were born, when your mother was a little girl, the English king said that everybody in the land ought to think as he thought, and go to a church like his. He said he would send us away from England if we did not do as he ordered. Now, we could not think as he did on holy matters, and it seemed wrong to us to obey him. So we decided to go to a country where we might worship as we pleased."

"What became of that cruel king, Mistress Brewster?"

"He ruleth England now. But thou must not think too hardly of him. He doth not understand, perhaps. Right will win some day, Remember, though there may be bloody war before peace cometh. And I thank God that we, at least, shall not be called on to live in the midst of the strife," she went on, speaking more to herself than to the little girl.

"We decided to go to Holland, out of the reach of the king. We were not sure whether it was best to move or not, but our hearts were set on God's ways. We trusted Him in whom we believed. Yes," she went on, "and shall we not keep on trusting Him?"

And Rose Standish, remembering the little stock of food that was nearly gone, the disease that had come upon many of their number, and the five who had died that month, answered firmly: "Yes. He who has led us thus far will not leave us now."

They were all silent a few seconds. Presently Remember said: "Then did ye go to Holland, Mistress Brewster?"

"Yes," she said. "Our people all went over to Holland, where the Dutch folk live and the little Dutch children clatter about with their wooden shoes. There thou wast born, Remember, and my own children, and there we lived in love and peace."

"And yet, we were not wholly happy. We could not talk well with the Dutch, and so we could not set right what was wrong among them. 'Twas so hard to earn money that many had to go back to England. And worst of all, Remember, we were afraid that you and little Bartholomew and Mary and Love and Wrestling and all the rest would not grow to be good girls and boys. And so we have come to this new country to teach our children

to be pure and noble."

After another silence Remember spoke again: "I thank thee, Mistress Brewster. And I will try to be a good girl. But thou didst not tell me about Christmas after all."

"Nay, child, but now I will. There are long services on that day in every church where the king's friends go. But there are parts of these services which we cannot approve; and so we think it best not to follow the other customs that the king's friends observe on Christmas.

"They trim their houses with mistletoe and holly so that everything looks gay and cheerful. Their other name for the Christmas time is the Yuletide, and the big log that is burned then is called the Yule log. The children like to sit around the hearth in front of the great, blazing Yule log, and listen to stories of long, long ago.

"At Christmas there are great feasts in England, too. No one is allowed to go hungry, for the rich people on the day always send meat and cakes to the poor folk round about.

"But we like to make all our days Christmas days, Remember. We try never to forget God's gifts to us, and they remind us always to be good to other people."

"And the Christmas carols, Mistress Standish? What are they?"

"On Christmas Eve and early on Christmas morning," Rose Standish answered, "little children go about from house to house, singing Christmas songs. 'Tis what I like best in all the Christmas cheer. And I promised to sing thee one, did I not?"

Then Mistress Standish sang in her dear, sweet voice the quaint old English words:

As Joseph was a-walking,
He heard an angel sing:
"This night shall be the birth-time
Of Christ, the heavenly King.

"He neither shall be born
In housen nor in hall,
Nor in the place of Paradise,
But in an ox's stall.

"He neither shall be clothed
In purple nor in pall,
But in the fair white linen
That usen babies all.

"He neither shall be rocked
In silver nor in gold,
But in a wooden manger
That resteth in the mould."

As Joseph was a-walking
There did an angel sing,
And Mary's child at midnight
Was born to be our King.

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

Before the song was over, Hannah had come on deck again, and was listening eagerly. "I thank thee, Mistress Standish," she said, the tears filling her blue eyes. "'Tis long, indeed, since I have heard that song."

"Would it be wrong for me to learn to sing those words, Mistress Standish?" gently questioned the little girl.

"Nay, Remember, I trow not. The song shall be thy Christmas gift."

Then Mistress Standish taught the little girl one verse after another of the sweet old carol, and it was not long before Remember could say it all.

The next day was dull and cold, and on Monday, the twenty-fifth, the

sky was still overcast. There was no bright Yule log in the Mayflower, and no holly trimmed the little cabin.

The Pilgrims were true to the faith they loved. They held no special service. They made no gifts.

Instead, they went again to the work of cutting the trees, and no one murmured at his hard lot.

"We went on shore," one man wrote in his diary, "some to fell timber, some to saw, some to rive, and some to carry; so no man rested all that day."

As for little Remember, she spent the day on board the Mayflower. She heard no one speak of England or sigh for the English home across the sea. But she did not forget Mistress Brewster's story; and more than once that day, as she was playing by herself, she fancied that she was in front of some English home, helping the English children sing their Christmas songs. And both Mistress Allerton and Mistress Standish, whom God was soon to call away from their earthly home, felt happier and stronger as they heard the little girl singing:

He neither shall be born
In housen nor in hall,
Nor in the place of Paradise,
But in an ox's stall.