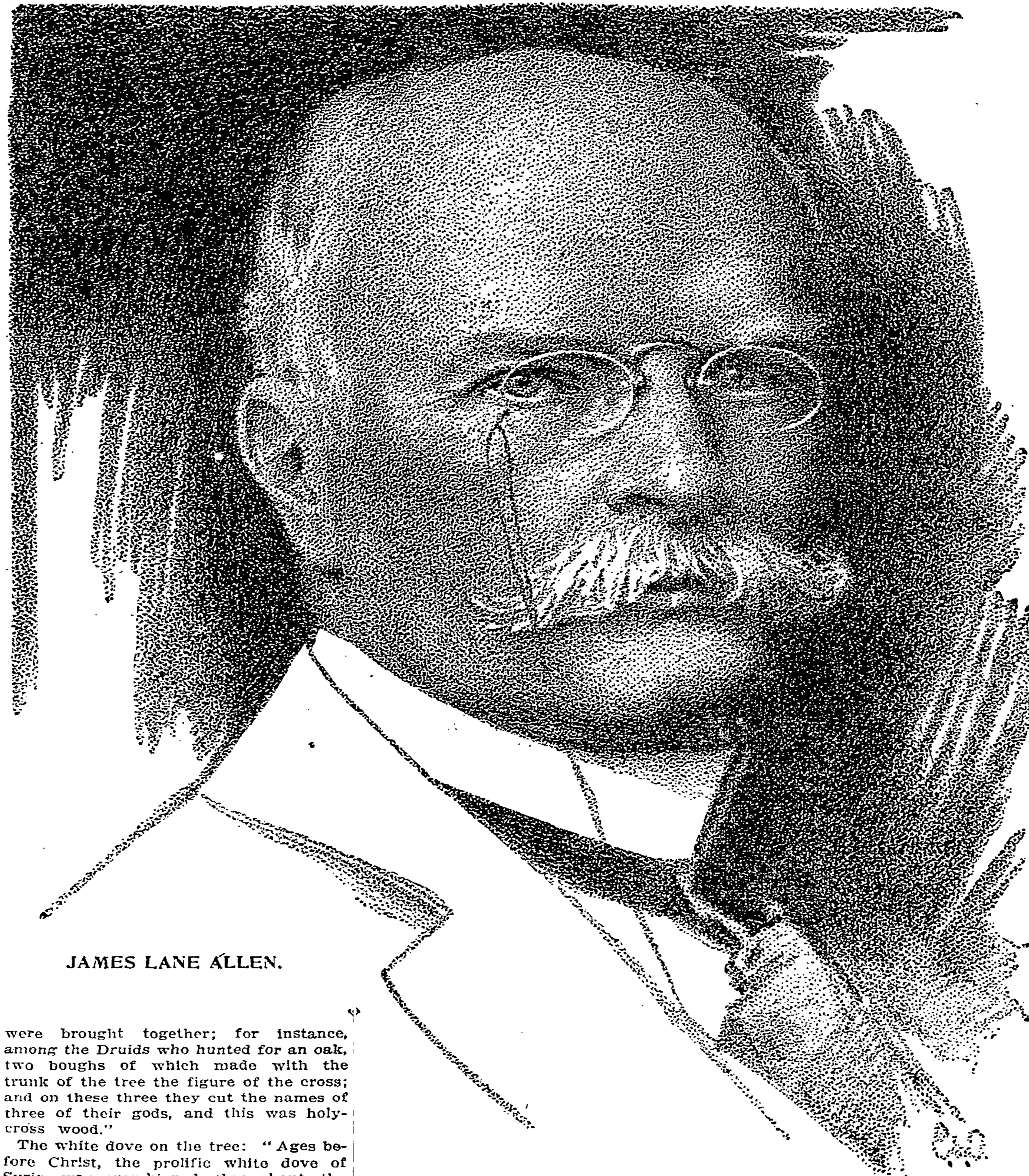


# JAMES LANE ALLEN ON "THE FUTURE CHRISTMAS"

## Author of "The Bride of the Mistletoe" Traces Festival to Remote Pagan Past and Pictures Its Development Through the Ages.



JAMES LANE ALLEN.

the divine. He stands between humanity and the tree that was once a god."

As indicating the cruelty of the old forest priests, the fore-runners of the modern Santa Claus, Mr. Allen quoted instances from the traditional history of Germany in which death was meted out to the man who dared cut off a branch from the sacred oak. He also pointed out the causes which led to the substitution of the evergreen for the oak in the old forest worship, and dwelt on the fact that in Santa Claus we are really burlesquing a primitive tragedy.

"Much of our love of Christmas," he said, "is the survival of old primitive instincts—the love of the tree in the forest. Dwelling in cities as we do, we can't go out into the forests to worship the tree, and so we bring it into our houses. It is the youth of nature brought to the fire-side at the time when we all wish to be young again."

"Will the celebration of Christmas change in the future, as it has changed in the past?" Mr. Allen was asked.

"I believe there will be a great revival of this old Nature Festival throughout the future of humanity. It is altogether credible that ages hence mankind will revive, in the form of play, everything that was gorgeous and beautiful in its primitive and pagan ceremonials. It will be like old age loving its childhood and bringing into its presence once more the toys and games of infancy. Even at the present time, on a limited scale, we are witnessing the energy of this same human trait in the revival of pageants in England and in our own country."

"I believe that the whole movement of mankind is back to nature, and that the love of nature is just beginning to be felt in us as it will be felt ages hence. And out of this future love will come the revival of the earliest nature festivals, just as the future students of English literature will turn with deeper interest than they do now to a study of 'The Canterbury Tales.'"

"I believe, in a word, that the whole modern movement of humanity is a movement back to nature such as we have not known since the old freedom of the pagan ages. Between man and nature, man and the universe, man and God, there will be no barrier, no intermediary. The third person who, for centuries, in some form or other, has placed himself between God and man as lawgiver, or intermediary, will disappear."

"As applied to the future celebration of Christmas," Mr. Allen was asked, "does this mean the elimination of the religious element?"

"It means the elimination of the theological formulas, which are always only temporary, and the celebration of Christmas with native emotion, with pure feeling, uninterfered with by any man's doctrine or any man's authority over the consciences of his fellow men."

"I believe the last ages of man's existence on this planet will be, in some wise, a return to the individual freedom of classic Greece, under the influence of which he attained a varied greatness which ever since he has looked upon as unsurpassed."

"And what part will the idea of Christmas take in the future Christmas?"

"He will have become again what he was once—humanity itself, suffering, but ascending to the Divine—the goal of all suffering, and the peace of all pain."

Mr. Allen then took up the subject of the two tendencies in fiction—one the older, the other the newer tendency.

"Formerly, in English literature," he said, "and in our own literature, there was the school of fiction which might be likened to a fisherman fishing in the sea, the fisherman being the author. You saw the fisherman, you followed his pole to its end, you followed the line to where it was dipped into the ocean. Then you saw the fish—the story—jerked out and taken home, where it was served up and devoured without further thought of the sea. It was simply a story, drawn up from the ocean of life, completely separated from the sea, and thus shorn of its natural environment, made to do duty as a work of art. I do not think that school of fiction can live much longer, the school which exhibits simply its story separated from the depths of life."

"The more modern school is better illustrated by a tapestry of complicated design, or by a rich composition in a painting. I shall try to indicate what I mean by referring to the masterpiece by Paul Veronese which has just been acquired by the Metropolitan Museum of Art. Here on my desk is the last bulletin of the Museum, as it happens, with the picture on the front page.

"In this picture there are many independent centres of interest for different orders of mind and appealing to the individual preferences of the beholders. One person looking at the picture, and afterward having left it, would have his remembrance concentrated chiefly on the figure of Venus. Another might scarcely think of Venus, and be absorbed instead in a study of the figure of Mars. A third might remember chiefly the horse in the background; a fourth only the exquisite figure of winged love. A fifth might recall the whole masterpiece solely for the head and face of the Satyr on whose head rests the roof of an architectural pile. A sixth observer might see only the pendent boughs of a tree, half overhanging Venus and Mars. A lapidary, a goldsmith, might study only the jewels around the neck of Venus and in her hair, or the medallions which decorate the dress of Mars. An athlete might think of the naked arm of Mars only.

"Thus, the newest school of fiction is not simple, like the old. It is complex, with many centres of different interests for different minds. It is like the great painting or the great piece of tapestry.

"There are three essentials that should go to the making of our native fiction: It should be local, it should be American, it should be human. The largest part of our fictional literature is local—the fisherman catching fish out of his neighborhood pond. There is very little value, however, in pure localism. It is the shallowest type of story-telling, never the elemental. It is picturesque, but negligible, always easiest to write; and that is why there is more of it in our American literature than any other kind."

"How about those writers of fiction, some of them to be found in the 'best seller' class, whose work may be characterized as being neither local, American nor reflecting the highest ideals of our civilization?" Mr. Allen was asked.

"They are the orbitless planets in a system with orbits. They are those workers who always accompany a movement, but who never form a vital force in it. But there is that other group of the few great ones who also fall outside this classification. Poe responded to nothing in American civilization, and might have lived anywhere so far as his work was affected by his residence in this country. He was a world genius, not an American genius. Another illustrious example of pure romance in this country was Hawthorne. But he was affected by both local and American influences, and did exhibit his characters against a background of elemental humanity.

"Setting these, and the 'orbitless planets' aside, the largest part of our fiction is the merely 'local,' which is easiest to do. A much rarer part, and far more difficult to do, is that fiction which is rooted in a locality, but is broad enough to contain the national note. Of this there is very little. In recent times, 'The American,' by Henry James, and 'The Rise of Silas Lapham,' by Mr. Howells, are good examples of this well-rounded American fiction. Mrs. Stowe's 'Uncle Tom's Cabin' belongs to an older period, but in structure it covers the three stages of development. In its day it was local, national, human.

"When you reach the greatest, ultimate stage of fiction it hardly exists among us. Ransack American literature up to the present hour; see if you can find six novels that are local, national, and that exhibit American character against a background of what is tragically or nobly human. If you could find them, these six novels would be the 'six best sellers.'

"I believe this country to be sick for great art and for great men, for great leaders and for great deeds. I believe it to be worn out with and tired of mere local stories. It wants to hear pure English in its fiction, not mere dialect. And in the voice of the American it wants to hear the greatest voice of humanity."

It is not often, in the history of literature, that a novelist has been found who is willing to devote years of research among the dusty records of antiquity in order to gather from thence a theme for an intensely modern story, a story whose characters and setting are in the America of to-day, whose passions are of that deeper quality that their analysis may be said to belong peculiarly to this century. Flaubert might have labored thus to perfect the offspring of his art. His "Salambo" is, indeed, a faultless monument to the years of conscientious study that its creator dedicated to its production. But aside from Flaubert, with his story of ancient Carthage, and his inexorable ideals of what the imaginative writer owes to his art, one does not readily recall a similar instance of painstaking devotion to the acquirement of what, to an outsider, appear to be the mere accessories to a work of fiction. To-day, however, such an instance is to be found in James Lane Allen. And Christmas is the theme to which Mr. Allen has devoted years of antiquarian research in order to furnish himself with the material for his two short novels, published nearly within a twelvemonth of each other, "The Bride of the Mistletoe" and "The Doctor's Christmas Eve," and for the third, to be published next, as his final connected work on the theme.

In a sense, the result of Mr. Allen's studies is the discovery of a new Christmas. Or, at least, he has interpreted the great Christian festival in a way that shows it to be the outcome of some of the most vital forces of humanity, that links it to a pagan past of untold antiquity, and that suggests a future development at once novel and inspiring.

Personally, Mr. Allen does not convey the traditional idea of the antiquarian, although in every way he impresses one as the literary scholar. He is large physically, peculiarly kindly and courteous in manner, and every inch of his stalwart frame is Kentuckian. Any one would guess correctly his birthplace, notwithstanding the fact that for more than twenty years he has lived away from his native hearth. His race is stamped indelibly upon him, and much of its rugged, primitive quality is in evidence in his workroom, where the visitor finds scarcely anything in the nature of ornament, and only one picture—an engraving of Balzac, large-featured, massive, genial—hanging over his desk. The environment and the man, optimistic in his view of things and deeply serious in his expression of them, were redolent of the spirit of a new Christmas.

"I chose Christmas," said Mr. Allen, in answer to his questioner, "because the story in which I have used it is one of youth and of the keeping of ties made in youth—and Christmas is the one festival in which we celebrate youth, and in which we all renew the spirit and the pledges of youth. I chose it because it is the only festival left to us which is national in its observance.

Asked as to his purpose in the writing of his two Christmas stories, "The Bride of the Mistletoe" and "The Doctor's Christmas Eve," Mr. Allen explained that he wished to root the latter in Kentucky.

"And next to this," he said, "I wished to make them American, the American note sounding through a nature festival—Christmas—that is American and national."

"Why regard Christmas as a national and, at the same time, a nature festival?"

"In our civilization to-day there linger not many traces of the old nature worship which once expressed itself through so many festivals. We still keep up some observance of Halloween and May Day, and here and there are local ceremonies that are, more or less, the last vestiges of extinct pagan faiths. But Christmas is the only relic of forest and tree worship that has been adopted by the whole nation.

"The only way to understand the American Christmas as we celebrate it is to take up first the study of the Christmas tree and trace it back to forest worship. Next, take up the history of all the decorations of the tree, coming down to us as votive offerings used in forest worship. Then, take up the study of all the rites and ceremonies which have been brought together from different countries

and different ages. And, finally, take up the study of Santa Claus."

Some of the results of his prolonged studies of the meaning and origin of the symbols used in our Christmas festivals Mr. Allen gives as follows in "The Bride of the Mistletoe"—and it is worth noting that these, or similar interpretations of Christmas have not before been brought together in a book:

"As soon as the forest worshipper began the worship of the tree, he began to bring to it his offerings and to hang these on the boughs; for religion consists in offering something; to worship is to give. In after ages, when man had learned to build shrines and temples, he still kept up his primitive custom of bringing to the altar his gifts and sacrifices; but during that immeasurable time before he had learned to carve wood or to set one stone on another, he was bringing his offerings to the grove—the only cathedral he had. And this to him was not decoration; it was prayer. So that in our age of the world when we playfully decorate the Christmas tree it is a survival of grave rites in the worship of primitive man and is as ancient as forest worship itself."

Taking up the various objects usually placed on the Christmas tree the scholar in the story thus explains them:

"The Star at the apex of the fir was commonly understood to represent the Star of Bethlehem, which guided the Wise Men of the East to the manger on the Night of the Nativity—the Star of the Newborn. But modern discoveries show that the records of ancient Chaldea go back four or five thousand years before the Christian era; and as far back as they have been traced, we find the Wise Men of the East worshipping this same star and being guided by it in their spiritual wanderings as they searched for the incarnation of the Divine. They worshipped it as the star of peace and goodness and purity. Many a pious Wolfram in those dim centuries no doubt sang his evening hymn to the same star, for love of some Chaldean Elizabeth—both he and she blown about the desert how many centuries now as dust. Moreover, on these records the Star and the Tree are brought together as here side by side. And the story of the Star leads backward to one of the first things that man ever worshipped as he looked beyond the forest; the light of the heavens floating in the depths of space—light that he wanted but could not grasp.

"Imagine the forest worshipper as at the end of ages having caught this light—having brought it down in the language of his myth from heaven to earth; that is, imagine the star in space as having become a star in his hand—the candle; the star worshipper had now also become the fire worshipper. Thus the candle leads us back to the fire worshippers of ancient Persia—those highlands of the spirit seeking light. We think of the Christmas candle on the tree as merely borrowed from the candle of the altar for the purpose of illumination; but the use of it goes back to a time when the forest worshipper, now also the fire worshipper, hung his lights on the trees, having no other altar. Far down toward modern times the temples of the old Prussians, for example, were oak groves, and among them a hierarchy of priests was ordained to keep the sacred fire perpetually burning at the root of the sacred oak."

The Cross under the candle: "To the Christian believer the Cross signifies one supreme event: Calvary and the tragedy of the crucifixion. It was what the Maries and the Apostle saw that morning in Gethsemane. But no one in that age thought of the cross as a Christian symbol. John and Peter and Paul and the rest went down into their graves without so regarding it. The Magdalene never clung to it with life-tired arms, nor poured out at the foot of it the benison of her tears. Not until the third century after Christ did the Bishops assembled at Nice announce it a Christian symbol. But it was a Christian emblem in the latest antiquity of Egypt. To primitive man it stood for that sacred light and fire of life which was himself. For he himself is a cross—the first cross he has ever known. The faithful may truly think of the Son of Man as crucified as the image of humanity. And thus ages before Christ, cross worship and forest worship

were brought together; for instance, among the Druids who hunted for an oak, two boughs of which made with the trunk of the tree the figure of the cross; and on these three they cut the names of three of their gods, and this was holy-cross wood."

The white dove on the tree: "Ages before Christ, the prolific white dove of Syria was worshipped throughout the Orient as the symbol of reproductive nature, and to this day the Almighty is there believed to manifest himself under this form. In ancient Mesopotamia the divine mother of nature is often represented with this dove as having actually alighted on her shoulder or in her open hand. And here again forest worship early became associated with the worship of the dove; for, sixteen hundred years before Christ, we find the dove nurtured in the oak grove at Dodona where its presence was an augury and its wings an omen. . . .

"The bell was used in Greece by the priests of Bacchus in the worship of the vine. And vine worship was forest worship. Moreover, in the same oak grove at Dodona bells were tied to the oak boughs and their tinklings also were sacred auguries. The drum which the modern boy beats on Christmas Day was beaten ages before Christ in the worship of Confucius; the story of it dies away

toward what was man's first written music in forgotten China. In the first century of the Christian era, on one of the most splendid of the old Buddhist sculptures, boys are represented as beating the drum in the worship of the sacred tree—once more showing how music passed into the service of forest faith."

Regarding Santa Claus, it may suffice, in a sentence, to say that he is the last figure in the long procession of priests of the sacred tree, which is lost in pagan antiquity. Thus, for example, this line runs back to the high priest of the Druids until it is lost to history. As this procession of priestly figures comes down to modern times it becomes less and less cruel as the world becomes more and more kindly, until finally we see it culminate in Santa Claus, a figure in which there is no suggestion of cruelty, and all is kindness. Santa Claus is really the last intermediary between the human and