

The Really Truly Christmas Fairies

That Sing in Chicago on Christmas Eve.

HUSH! Listen to the music!—It is the Christmas fairies singing to the sick!
 This is the whispered warning with which the mothers in the University settlement district silence their children Christmas eve. It is spoken at the first strain of the song which, all through the Christmas week, is eagerly listened for each night at dusk by both old and young.

To the weary ones at the hospital the fresh voices floating in on the night air are heavenly music. To the well ones all through the thickly populated district of the "yards" the first carol that pours from the throats of the Christmas children is the signal for the opening of a great festival.

In this festival the one-seventh of the population of all Chicago, which is gathered in the yards participates, young and old alike. Through all the Christmas week the older as well as the younger children drink in with simple faith the fancies and legends that center about the Christ child, and wonder with ever fresh delight at that which is tinged with the weird, the strange, and the mysterious. To these the Christmas fairies mean as much and more as the Christmas "watts" of other countries.

And who, if you please, are the Christmas fairies?

Choir of Little Green Elves.

They are a choir of thirty little children, whose voices have been picked from the "Skylarks," the "Little Neighbors," and other singing classes attached to the settlement, and who have been especially trained to sing the Christmas carols. They are dressed like little green elves, with long capes and strange peaked caps of green, lined with red trimmings that turn back about the face, and with long red hoods hanging down behind.

To the simple folk they are a source of never ending wonder and delight. Their queer costumes, the mystery of their appearance just after the twilight, their spectacular dancing around the Christmas tree, with which is opened every night's festivities in the great gymnasium, make a wonderful and simple appeal that never loses its potency or effect. Known sometimes as the "singing children," the Christmas Fairies are the leading spirit of the Christmas mystery, without which no festivities would be complete. They touch the button with which the activities begin.

It is at the settlement where most of the Christmas activities center. Here is a gymnasium which is equipped with a stage where is set up the biggest and grandest Christmas tree that can be procured. Every night during the week this is lighted and one and another of the clubs, of old and young, come here to have their Christmas party. Music and dancing, in which all take part, go on each night. The feature of the evening, however, is the entrance of the



Photo by Gibson Art Galleries

Besides St. Nicholas there is the wonderful Christchild of the little German children, who is supposed to bring all the gifts. There are also the Jews in the neighborhood to whom the tree and the "fairies" make a distinct appeal, though they cannot share in the other legends. Each of these nationalities and the clubs have their time of being entertained or of entertaining themselves in the gymnasium, the children inviting their own fathers and mothers, and the "Mothers' club" entertaining the young men's and young girls' clubs.

Christmas Day the Gladdest Time.

But perhaps the most beautiful thing that happens in the settlement is the gathering which comes this year on Christmas afternoon, and which always comes on the Sunday nearest to Christmas day. At this the "Children's Messiah" is sung by the Christmas fairies, and Miss McDowell, who is not only the special sponsor of the "fairies" but the fairy godmother to all the children, tells the old yet ever new legends of the Christchild and St. Christopher. The merriment and the open house, and the Christmas tree which is lighted every evening, and the music by the children, says Miss McDowell, "are substituted for elaborate gifts at the settlement. The first year we were here having gifts upon the tree was tried, but among so many there could not help being a rivalry which did not have a good effect. So, with the exception of the stocking that is provided for each one of the 500 children that are connected with the settlement and the custom of giving something to the old people, there are no presents made. Each of the old people has a stocking into which there is something put, a pound of coffee if it is a German and a pound of tea if it happens to be an Irishman or an old Irish woman. Then, of course, there is many a basket sent out at night where it is known to be needed.

Catch True Sentiment of Christmas.

"But the fact they don't expect anything and that they come to the settlement for pleasure alone has had an effect which can be already recognized. One of the customs we have when there is a small gathering is to blow out the candles on the tree and wish upon each one before breaking up. Between the wishes that are made now and those that used to be there is a marked difference. They used to be of a personal character, but now they are nearly always for some improvement in the neighborhood or about the settlement.

"It was five or six years ago that somebody wished for a small park, and it was returned and remodeled, and now that they have the new park at Forty-fifth street and Marshall avenue they feel it is in some way the direct result of that wish. One of the funniest wishes we have ever had, and at which we were all greatly entertained, was that of an old German woman who wished in the most native way 'that the old maids—referring to us of the settlement—should soon have a home of their own.' Now that we have the new place there is no greater joy than among the old people of the neighborhood."

Old Folks Dance with Delight.

One of the features of the Christmas parties in which not only the Christmas fairies, but in which all, even to the oldest, participate, is the dancing. In this it is noticeable that though the children have to be taught, the old country people dance rhythmically, and under the influence of the music there are many strange fancies told and many confidences given that would not be revealed under other circumstances. Two or three years ago an old woman of the neighborhood who had the reputation of being hard to get along with and who had lived alone for many years because it was rumored no one could live with her, was invited by one of the gentlemen visiting at the settlement to dance. To the surprise of all the rest, and perhaps a little to his own, she accepted. The next day one of the women said to her, "Why, grandmother, I was surprised to see you dance. How did you happen to do it?"

"Well, I did it," she answered, "because the night before I had a beautiful dream. I dreamed that an angel came to me and said, 'Cry no more, it is all right for you now.' And so I danced the first time for many years." When, however, the next year this man who had first thought to ask her to dance was ill, old "grandmother" could not be persuaded to get up on the floor, although since her dream she has believed that all would be well with her, and has cried no more.

elflike fairies, which is the signal that the merriment is to begin.

Dancing Fairies Bring Good Luck.

The tree is lighted, and as the electric lights go out all eyes are turned to a little log cabin that stands low, back under the hanging branches. Cautiously the door opens, and one of the green elves is seen to steal out. Sometimes he has in his hand a long, white taper which he lights at the tree with quick, mysterious motions. He is followed by one and then another of the fairies until there is a circle of hooded sprites who begin to dance and sing around the tree. Whatever the gathering, whether it be one of grandfathers and grandmothers or of the smallest children, the Christmas fairies must first appear for the good luck of the occasion.

Then there is a Santa Claus of the round and rosy faced kind, who comes out from the door of the little cabin a few minutes after the fairies, and wishes them all "A Merry Christmas and a Happy New Year." He is modest and keeps well in the background, for there are all kinds of saints which enter into the celebration of Christmas over here where there are so many nationalities.

Faith in St. Nicholas Strong.

For instance, one of the most important saints which is feared a good deal, especially by the little Bohemian children, is St. Nicholas, who is different from and in all ways quite as much of a contrast as possible to Santa Claus. He is the saint who goes around early to see that little children are good. He is a cross between a monk and a groom, and wears a cowl, and has a long, smooth shaven, serious, and mysterious face. His time for coming is the second Sunday before Christmas, and he is supposed to poke around in the middle of the night making a great racket. He is believed to visit the homes of at least all the Bohemian children around the settlement, and at the great party which the Bohemian women give their people, and at which they give presents to their children, he is always present. So cleverly, he is impersonated by one of the Bohemian women, who are adepts in this art, that even the grown up boys and girls have a strong faith in his reality.