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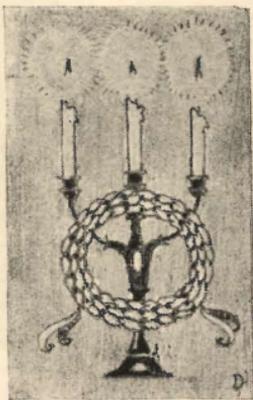
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# CHRISTMAS EVE ON BEACON HILL

By RICHARD BOWLAND KIMBALL

DRAWINGS BY MAURICE DAY



“Thus did a candle placed on  
a bushel — Beacon Hill is the  
bushel — light the whole house.”

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# CHRISTMAS EVE ON BEACON HILL

By RICHARD BOWLAND KIMBALL

**W**HEN we moved to Boston, we hadn't even heard of the Christmas Eve Celebration on Beacon Hill and when the kindest of friends suggested inducting us into the ceremony, we accepted, without any definite idea of the experience that lay before us.

If Boston is a state of mind, what is Beacon Hill? It would seem the crystallization and the quintessential of that mind. Dominated by the State House with its golden dome and enshrined Sacred Codfish, it runs down to the Charles River with its esplanade. Here the lusty members of the Union Boat Club disport in racing shells, and the sun sets beyond the river and behind Cambridge and the new monumental buildings of Boston Tech.

There has been a peaceful invasion of the quarter

by artists in their several sorts—writers, painters, interior decorators. Little magazines of advanced ideas start and stop there. The hammers of silver-smiths are going all day long, and on a side street, in the most charming of converted stables, the Boston Little Theatre movement had its rise. There are little, exclusive clubs dedicated to rare bindings, or new music, or radical political ideals. On Beacon Street proper, old Colonial mansions climb sedately, facing the two parks and the business streets beyond. The Woman's City Club is domiciled next door but one to the Somerset, most exclusive club of all, where one's great-great-grandfather makes one automatically eligible for membership and where even the condiments are labelled with the numbers of vintage years. The great-great-grandsons sit behind the windows, sipping a rare tabasco or a wonderful Worcestershire, and gaze out at the Common, most democratic of open spaces, most used and most abused park, perhaps, in all the world.

Back of Beacon Street, on the mid-slope of Beacon Hill, Louisburg Square opens with its oval park and its quaint statue of Columbus. Here, on Columbus Day, Italians from the plebeian side of Beacon Hill come to hang wreaths on the statue. The Italian flag waves, cock-feather plumes glisten

We have an idea that many of the first ladies who lighted candles in their windows on Christmas Eve felt a good deal as Miss Pyncheon felt in "The House of the Seven Gables" that first day when she opened her shop. Her first sale was only an apple or an all-day sucker and her first customer was only a harmless little boy. But her lavender-veined hands trembled and her heart beat fast. And she went through with it like the true New England lady that she was.

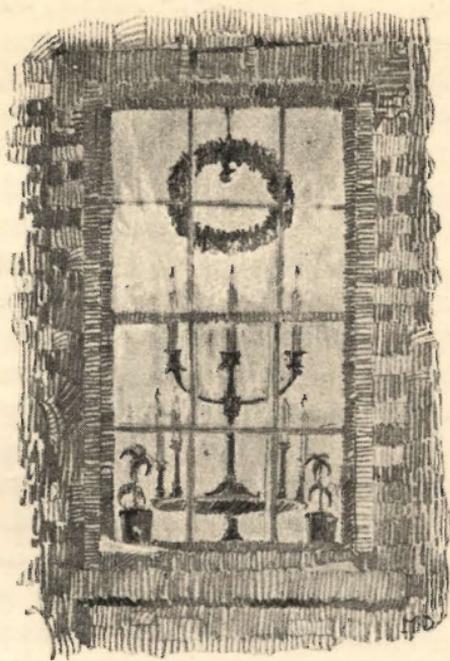
The illumination on Beacon Hill on Christmas Eve reminds us somewhat of a decrepit New England orchard. As spring draws near processes are at work without our realizing it. Underneath, unknown to us, the sap is stirring. One morning we awaken to behold a miracle. The whole orchard has become transfigured in a burst of bloom.

To Mrs. Ralph Adams Cram belongs the credit of the suggestion. She urged her friends to follow her own example and put candles in their windows. One Christmas Eve, the Cram family with several guests went about the Hill and sang Christmas hymns under the windows of a few friends. The next year, Mrs. Cram invited other friends to join them, and so "The Chestnut Street Christmas Association" came into being. This was eight years

ago and the custom has spread. Last year Christmas Eve was celebrated with candles and carols as far west as San Francisco, as far north as Labrador.

Thus did a candle placed on a bushel—Beacon Hill is the bushel—light the whole house.





“ We suppose that the real reason we illuminate our houses on Christmas Eve is the perennial hope of humanity that He may tread the earth again, and we want our lamps filled and trimmed and burning to receive Him.”

in the sunlight, there are bravura fanfares from the Italian band. Once the quiet square was invaded by a moving picture company. The cinema camera clicked, while the company, headed by Mrs. Fiske, went through their inexplicable dumb show, registering "Becky Sharp" for screens in Tonawanda and Tuckahoe. What must the gentle denizens of the square have thought of this bizarre performance.

Beacon Hill has been saved almost intact in its quaint charm and real beauty through its innate, New England conservatism, that resistance to any change which is so valuable in fluid America, and invaluable when it saves as precious a thing as Beacon Hill.

We had explored the region. We had taken wonderful walks up and down and around and over, through narrow streets and broad and crooked streets and straight—although most of them were very crooked. We had found infinitesimal squares that were really triangles, and queer unexpected tucked-in courts—just big enough for Peter Pan to alight in—and we had lost them and found them again, and some of them we could never find again; and we were rather glad of this, for we know Beacon Hill must contain many a square no bigger than a child's handkerchief that never shows itself except

between the glimpses of the moon. Old white doors, old brass knockers, old wrought-iron-work, old red brick, old purple window-glass—well, it was like Quebec and like old London, but most of all it was like itself. Yet we had a feeling that many of the old dormers gave somewhat the effect of a lifted eyebrow and that, under the fanlights—delicate as lace—it would be presumptuous to raise the old knockers and call. There was reserve, if not reticence, throughout the region, something gentle, but very firm, as if the old traditions, like old china, would be protected from clumsy hands.

On Christmas Eve, as we approached the quarter, we became aware of diffused light not apprehended, as it seemed, by the physical eye; we became conscious of a hush we could hear with an inner organ. At a step we were in another world—a world of faery, a world of beauty, a world of faith. The streets were crowded—groups moving slowly and differently than they would move in the light of common day. Candles beyond counting in the windows, Della Robbia Madonnas or painted medieval ecclesiastical carvings fastened to the old housewalls, green wreaths on the old white doors, Christmas trees behind the panes; and moving among the groups, church choirs, led by trumpeters,



“ We learned that on this night of the year  
there is no need of knockers on Beacon  
Hill — all the houses keep open house.”

stopping and singing before the houses old carols—

“I saw three ships come sailing in,  
On Christmas Day, on Christmas Day,”

or

“We are three Kings from Orient speeding,”

or the early English carol,—

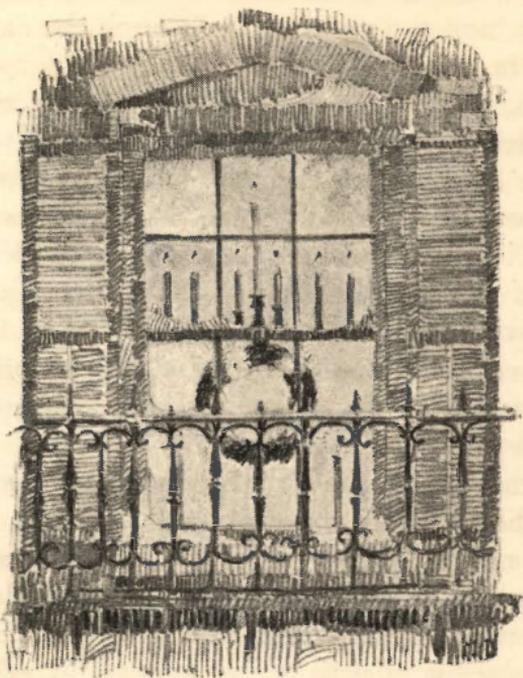
“Listen, lordlings unto me, a tale I will you tell  
Which, as on this night of glee, in David’s town befel.  
Sing high, sing low, sing to and fro,  
Go tell it out with speed,  
Cry out and shout it all about,  
That Christ is born indeed.”

Many members of the groups joined in the singing and there were amateur choirs, a trio or quartette of friends singing under their own friends’ windows like the Christmas “waits” we have seen pictures of, none the less charming because so intimate. The groups moved slowly from place to place, following this choir or that. Evidently choirs have their own personal following, and there were houses, as it seemed, where certain choirs paid special tribute of their song. The churches were all illuminated, too,—fragrant with Christmas greens, and with incense in those churches of the colorful tradition that carries into our own days the myrrh and frankincense the

Magi brought of old. In these churches were creches, mangers with the image of the Christ-child in them, and living little children came and knelt beside them, and old women who had borne many children, and young wives and husbands, strong in the pride of life.

We suppose the real reason we illuminate our houses on Christmas Eve, so deep as almost to be beyond our recognition, is the perennial hope of humanity that He may tread the earth again, and we want our lamps filled and trimmed and burning to receive Him. If indeed He should appear on Christmas Eve, we believe it would not be the illuminated homes He would enter first, nor even the churches ringing with services in His honor.

On the shady side of Beacon Hill, there is a gray, dark, grewsome bulk of building, rising as forbidding as a block of senseless stone. To this building first of all, we believe His steps would lead Him, and He would enter it whether it was illuminated or not. So it is fitting that at the close of the church service, the choir, trumpeters leading, rosy-cheeked boys, studious-faced men, the rector last of all, like a true shepherd, should thread their way through mean streets and sing their carols outside the city jail. It is fitting they should enter it and by song and



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prayer renew the hope of freedom for all captives, in the day when all bonds shall be loosed in that perfect liberty which can come only through the expression of perfect love.

The kindest of friends conducted us to one of the old houses we had gazed at often, wishing we might raise the knocker, and we learned that on this night of the year there is no need of knockers on Beacon Hill—all the houses keep open house. We almost trembled as we used the old china; an old punch bowl brimmed and blushed as at the first miracle; there was a creche and wreaths and candles and furniture as delicate as china, and traditions, and Old Bostonians. Our hostess remarked that of course there was something a little paganistic about it all. She told us about one of our lost squares and the tree that grew in it—the previous summer, at the rumor of a bug on it, the fire department, of its own volition, came out and sprayed. She told us that she had a well in her cellar and when the subway was building she was fearful it might run dry, but it hadn't.

“Wonderful water, I suppose?”

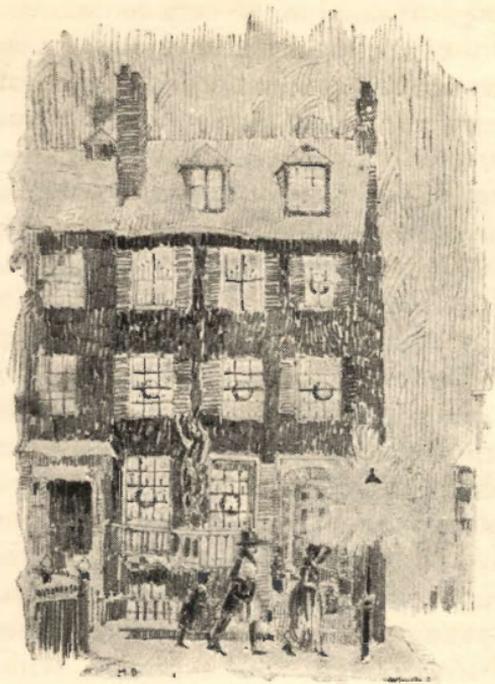
“Oh, nobody has drunk of it for years!”

The well in the cellar! Significant with a mystic symbolism! Probably each one of us has a well in

the cellar, although many of us may not know it. To those who do this well of living water is a precious thing. Hidden in the very center, we may not use it very often, but we know that it is there.

We learned that this annual blossoming of Beacon Hill in light and color, music and hospitality, and the ceremonial of a moving faith, had a very small beginning. It wasn't easy to start it. The denizens of Beacon Hill said, "If we put candles in the windows, what will people think? Won't it look *queer?*?"

That terror of queerness, that aversion to non-conformity is at once the strength and weakness of the Anglo-Saxon race. At base it is the conserving instinct, what might be called the Mother Spirit holding inviolate the ark of life. There is a terrible recalcitrance about it, the momentum of rest. But there is a splendid momentum of motion about it also. Let but the mother spirit perceive that through innovation it can achieve to life more abundant, and it's time for the common or garden radical to stand from under—your explosive Italian, your Frenchman with his intellectual cosmic plan. And so it comes about that apparently the least artistic of peoples brought forth Shakespeare; the least religious, Smithfield and Wesley; the least adventurous, Frobisher and Drake.



“Candles beyond counting in the windows.”

