

The PURITANS' FIRST CHRISTMAS

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SINCE the founders of New England are commonly regarded as the inventors of Thanksgiving Day and the cordial haters of Christmas Day, it is a bit strange to find evidence which seems to show that the Plymouth Pilgrims had a Christmas celebration in America before their first Thanksgiving Day feast.

Maybe their first little celebration was more or less accidental, and should be blamed on the carelessness of the captain of the Mayflower, because just a year later the governor of Plymouth promptly and firmly squashed another attempt at holding Christmas festivities. Here is what the records show.

Early in November of 1620 the Mayflower had sighted Cape Cod. It lingered in Cape Cod Bay while the coast was being explored, and on December 25 work was begun on the first house to be built for common use. Most of the passengers, however, were still on board ship, and on this particular day they were, apparently, having a more cheery time than the house-builders on shore. An old document called Mourt's "Relation" tells of a modest celebration, including a little beer by way of change from drinking merely water. Says this ancient record: "Monday the 25. being Christmas day, we began to drinke water aboard, but at night the Master caused us to have some Beere, and so on board we had diverse times now and then some Beere, but on shore none at all."



One minister complained: "I hear a Number of Young People of both Sexes have had on the Christmas-night, this last week, a Frolic, a revelling Feast, and a Ball, which discovers their corruption."

The next effort at celebrating Christmas in Plymouth was a flat failure, though it got away to a pretty good start. It was staged by a group who didn't seem to belong in this upright and unplayful community, so fearful that Christmas-keeping might corrupt the 100 per cent Puritanism of which they were so proud.

THESE gayer ones had already shown a mutinous spirit while on board the Mayflower. They were probably from the city of London, and on that account felt themselves considerably smarter than their Pilgrim associates. They were considered "lusty young men and many of them wild enough, who little considered whither or about what they

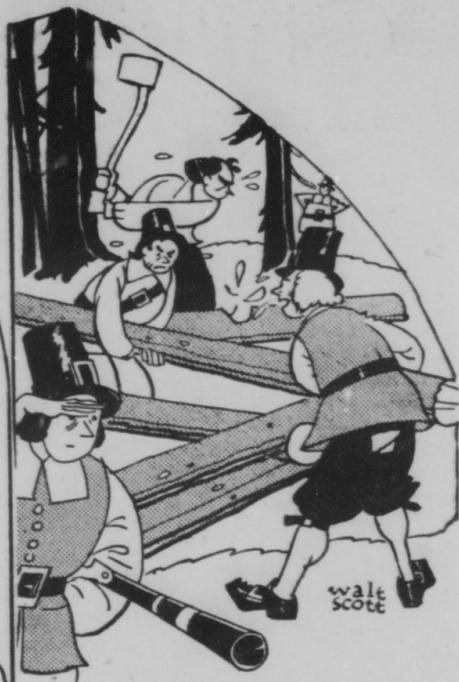
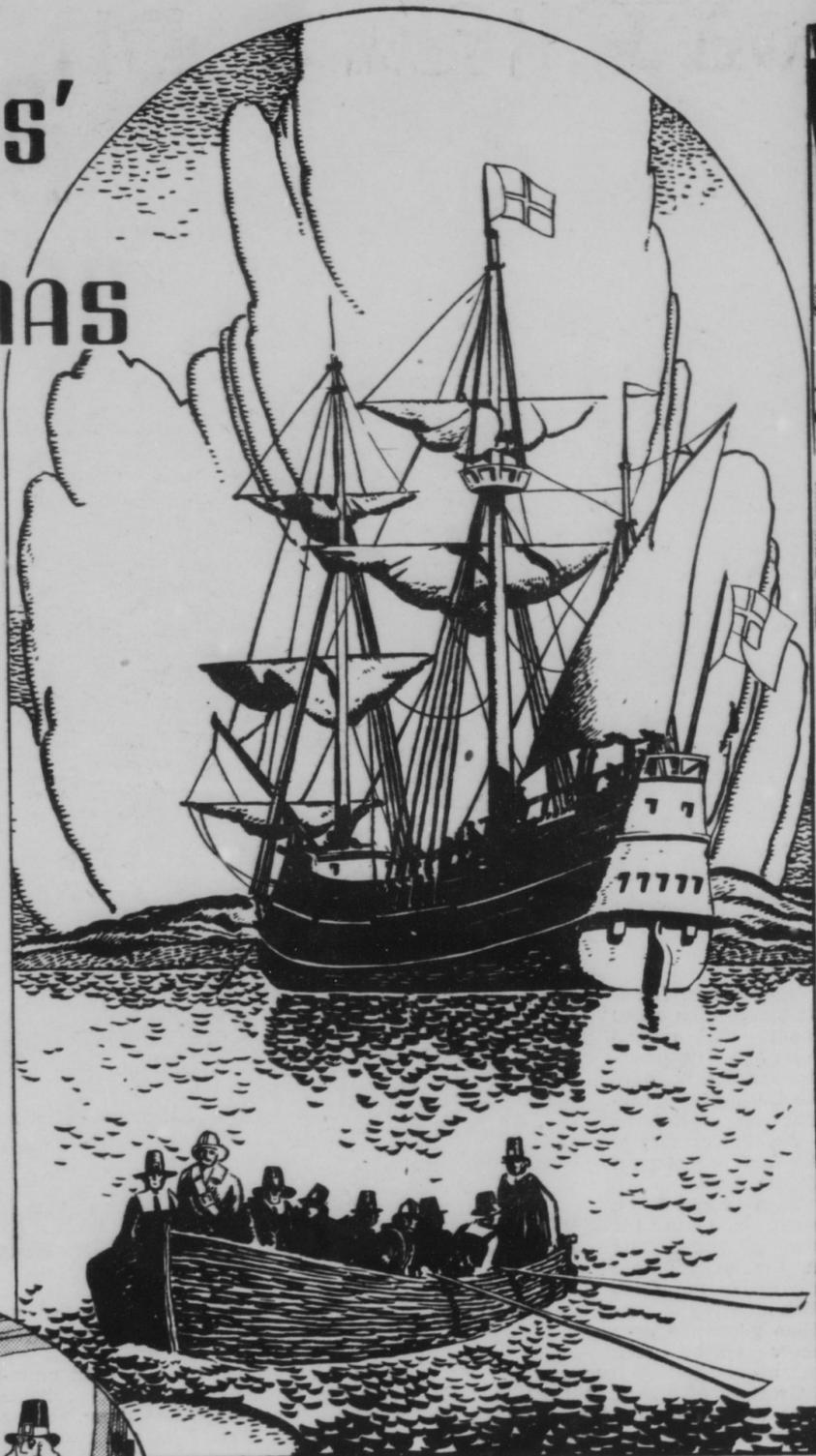
went." Some of them later on committed thefts and "smarted well for it." At least one was "found guilty of willful murder, by plaine and notorious evidence," and was hanged therefore. These were the black sheep of the little Plymouth flock who, on Christmas Day of 1621, tried to slip something over on Governor Bradford and make a holiday of it, but he was much too sharp for them.

In his famous "History of Plimoth Plantation," he relates the story with some glee, as if he thought it a rather good joke. He writes near the end of a chapter, as a kind of quaintly humorous postscript, "I shall remember one passage more, rather of mirth than of weight. On the day called Christmas-

day, the Governor called them out to work, (as was used) but the most of this new-company excused themselves and said it went against their consciences to work on that day. So the Governor told them that if they made it a matter of conscience, he would spare them till they were better informed. So he led away the rest and left them; but when they came home at noon from their work, he found them in the streets at play, openly; some pitching the bar, and some at stool ball, and such like sports. So he went to them and took away their implements, and told them that was against his conscience, that they should play and others work. If they made the keeping of it (i. e., Christmas) a matter of devotion, let them keep in their houses, but there should be no gaming or revelling in the streets. Since which time nothing hath been attempted that way, at least openly."

All this happened down in Plymouth colony.

Farther up in Massachusetts they felt so strongly on this subject that they passed a law about it in 1659. This law provided "that whosoever shall be found observing any such day as Christmas and the like, either by forbearing labor, feasting, or any other way upon any such account as aforesaid, every such person so offending shall pay for



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each such offense, five shillings as a fine to the Country."

The celebration of Christmas was all mixed up, in the minds of the younger generation at least, with certain preferred forms of early New England wickedness, such as cards and dancing. Witness the following letter requesting the advice of the Reverend John Cotton, who was at that time minister of the first church of Boston:

"Sir
"Another question is concerning their toys they use at the time, which they say they celebrate in remembrance of Christ's birth (though they never less remember him) viz. carding, dancing, &c. I know not what my duty is, that I may discharge a good conscience. I have oft upon occasion spoken against mixt dancing after feasts, little thinking there had been any such suffered and practiced here."

The Reverend Mr. Cotton replied: "Carding I take to be unlawful lascivious dancing to wanton ditties, and in amorous gestures and wanton dalliances, especially after great feasts, I would bear witness against."

AS the 17th century turned into the 18th, irrepressible and pleasure-loving youngsters managed somehow to be more and more gay at Christmas-time, at first secretly, later openly; and many a hard-pressed minister, seeking to defend the better ways of the godly past, uttered such complaints as the following: "I hear a Number of Young People of both Sexes, belonging, many of them, to my Flock, have had on the Christmas-night, this last week, a Frolic, a revelling Feast, and a Ball, which discovers their Corruption, and has a tendency to corrupt them yett more, and provoke the Holy One to give them up unto eternal Hardness of Heart."

The corrupting efforts of the "Young People of both Sexes" happened to coincide somewhat in this matter with the practices and purposes of the Anglican Church, which from the beginning had been struggling to maintain itself in New England as a place of refuge for those who liked their religion a little less chilly and severe than was the Puritan brand. As Anglicans became more numerous, toward the end of the 17th century, they found ways to celebrate their favorite church festival of Christmas, to the grave disquietment of their Puritan neighbors; Samuel Sewall, for instance, forbade his son to go to the Anglican Christmas services and the attendant Christmas rejoicings.

