

## Column

Everyone, I dare say, has a favorite Christmas movie. I have two, both from the late '40s and both filmed in black and white: "The Bishop's Wife" and "Miracle on 34<sup>th</sup> Street." I watched the latter last night on the eve of St. Nicholas' Day (Dec. 5).

St. Nicholas, of course, is the antecedent and inspiration for our Santa Claus. In *Miracle on 34<sup>th</sup> Street*, he goes by the name Kris Kringle. That name comes from the German word "Christkindl" and means "Christ child" or "Christmas gift".

By whatever name he is called, this mythical figure has an interesting history. The man who gave rise to today's Santa was a fourth century Christian bishop of the East. Nicholas was born in Asia Minor and was known for his kindly deeds. According to one legend, Nicholas learned of an impoverished minor nobleman whose three daughters lacked dowries and could not marry. To save them from a life of prostitution, he dropped three bags of gold, one for each girl, through a window. One bag, as the tale goes, fell into a stocking which gave rise to the

custom of hanging stockings. Further, Nicholas has gone down in history as the patron of pawnbrokers, the protector of the young, of travelers, of sailors, and even pirates!

St. Nicholas was brought to the American continent by German settlers. It did not take long, however, for his fame to spread to non-Germans, who became ardent believers in the saint.

When he first appeared on this continent, St. Nicholas was still very much a citizen of the Old World. Rather than a plump, jovial pink-cheeked fellow, he was a lean, pale ascetic carrying a dark miter and staff of a bishop. More than that, he did not appear on Christmas Eve, but on the eve of Dec. 6, the date of his death.

This original Santa brought not only smiles and presents with him, but also a set of switches. Children whose behavior had been less than exemplary during the previous months were held in suspense as they anticipated his arrival.

From where then did we get the modern-day image of Santa Claus? Harnett T. Kane in “The Southern Christmas Book” (a book every Southerner and want-a-be Southerner should read annually) attributes Santa’s metamorphosis to the poem “A Visit from St. Nicholas”. It was written in 1822 by Dr. Clement Moore, a teacher at General Theological Seminary in New York City.

Returning to Miracle on 34<sup>th</sup> Street, over a decade ago, I was in New York a week or so before Christmas and went to Macy’s seeking the ‘real’ Kris Kringle. I did not find him, but I still believe . . . at least in the values he represents: love, kindness and generosity. If you think about it, these three are the values of the One who is more than a myth, the One who took real human flesh and came among us 2000 years ago.

The real miracle did not take place on 34<sup>th</sup> Street, but at Calvary. Seek Him. He will not disappoint and will be found.

*O GOD, who makest us glad with the yearly remembrance of the birth of thine only Son Jesus*

*Christ; Grant that as we joyfully receive him for our Redeemer, so we may wit sure confidence behold him when he shall come to be our Judge, who liveth and reigneth with thee and the Holy Ghost, one God, world without end. Amen.* (The Book of Common Prayer.

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