

“CHRISTMAS DAYS IN OLD VIRGINIA” · 1907

cabins of their parents. It has been my pleasure and privilege to receive many Christmas presents, but I do not think I ever had a present that made me feel more happy than those which I received during what was, as I remember, the last Christmas I spent in slavery. I awoke at four o'clock in the morning in my mother's cabin, and creeping over to the chimney, I found my stocking well-filled with pieces of red candy and nearly half a dozen ginger-cakes. In addition to these were the little wooden shoes with the leather tops, which I have mentioned.

The Christmas season ended with the cutting of the “Yule Log” for the next Christmas. My readers will all know something of the “Yule Log,” but they will scarcely understand what the custom meant in the old days in the South, unless they have seen the “Yule Log” cut, and have counted the days that it burned.

On many of the plantations in Virginia it was the custom for the men to go out into the swamps on the last day of the Christmas season, select the biggest, toughest and greenest hardwood tree they could find, and cut it in shape to fit the fireplace in the master's room. Afterwards this log would be sunk into the water, where it would remain the entire succeeding year. On the first day of the following Christmas, it would be taken out of the water; the slaves would go into the master's room before he got out of his bed on Christmas morning, and, with a song and other ceremonies, would place this log on the fireplace of the master, and would light it with fire.

It was understood that the holiday season would last until this log had been burned into two parts. Of course, the main point in the selection of the “Yule Log” was to get one that would be tough and unburnable, so that it would last as many days as possible. At the burning out of the log, there was usually another ceremony of song. This meant that Christmas was over.

As I look back in my memory to those Christmas days, thus spent as a slave-boy in Virginia, the present stiff and staid customs which prevail, especially in the large cities, seem to me “flat, stale, and unprofitable.”

Again I repeat, that in my opinion the real Christmas must be spent in the country, and I cannot but feel that there is in the Virginia Christmas atmosphere a fragrance and an influence which is not to be found elsewhere.