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CHRISTMAS AND ITS CUSTOMS.

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CHRISTMAS is the festival of the year. With modern Christian nations it takes precedence of all and every religious celebration. Its blessings are for the old as well as for the young. The magnificent shows, which welcomed it, in the old ba-

ronial times, have, indeed, long been dis-used. We no longer see the boar's-head borne in, to the sound of violin and harp, to grace the overloaded table. We no longer behold the page, with the wassail bowl, preceded by the mimic trumpeter. We no longer hear the shouting, the music, and the mirth of the jester, as crowds of servitors drag the yule log into the great hall, where the baron and his lady stand, in state, to welcome it. The mimes, the games, the buffoonery, the noisy revels have passed away. But not the less hearty is our modern observance of Christmas. On the contrary, the festival is the more appropriately kept, in whatever it is more sedate than formerly. In thousands of happy homes, the Christmas tree is raised: in thousands of churches prayer and thanksgiving go up. All over the land, the hospitable board, at the old homestead, is spread for children and grandchildren. Once more the parental roof-tree overshadows the reunited family, and sheds down upon them its calm and peaceful blessing. Alienations are

forgotten, jealousies disappear, heart burnings cease to be. The genial atmosphere of Christmas thaws out even selfishness itself. And the angels, who sang "peace and good-will to men," on that still, calm morning, eighteen centuries ago, seem even yet to reverent minds, to usher in this sacred dawn. The last star is paling before the





morning. Hark! do you not hear seraphic voices?

In England many of the old customs still survive. On Christmas Eve, groups of singers rove about, from house to house, singing "Christmas Waits:" and are usually rewarded, after the ancient fashion, with a dole. The church bells are set merrily ringing. Many of the wealthy landed proprietors still keep up the habit of dispensing coals and blankets to the poor, at the door of the castle or the mansion. Children go out into the woods, to cut holly, or look for



for mistletoe; and their mirthful laughter makes many a silent dell vocal with gladness. The churches are all decked out with evergreen. As in the United States, gifts are exchanged between husband and wife, parents and children, betrothed lovers, friends, sisters, and old acquaintances. Hampers of game are sent,

from country relatives, to cousins in the city. The poorest indulge, on Christmas day, in a good dinner. Hilarity everywhere prevails.

On this side of the Atlantic, Christmas is less universally observed: indeed, until within a few years, it was hardly kept at all in New England, except by the members of the Episcopal church; and even yet, over large portions of that intelligent section, it is regarded as of secondary importance to Thanksgiving Day. But in the middle states it has always been the chief festival of the year. In Virginia, where so much of the old cavalier spirit survives, Christmas has been kept, from the era of the first settlement at Jamestown, with more unanimity, perhaps, than anywhere else in the United States. As we go further south, we find it the national holiday, if we may use such a phrase, for the Anglo-African races. In Charleston, it is welcomed, by the negroes, with the discharge of Chinese crackers, and all the uproar which distinguishes the Fourth of July at the North. At Havana it



becomes almost a Saturnalia, or, to speak more strictly, an uproarious negro carnival.

Oh! blessings on Christmas! How the little hearts of children throb with delight, as it draws near: and how, week after week, the dear

ones ask, "Isn't Christmas 'most here?" Visions of plum-puddings, turkeys, and other delicacies, float before their imagination: they linger about the kitchen doors, all Christmas morning, if not at church; and when the pudding is triumphantly taken up, they follow it, shouting and dancing, wild with glee. Ah! our mouth fairly waters at the thought: we are a child again; we taste, in fancy, the delicious dish, than which nectar could not be more exquisite. Will we ever again enjoy anything as we enjoyed the Christmas pudding?

But the Christmas tree is the crowning joy for children. With what rapt wonder they gaze on it, when it is revealed to them for the first time in their lives, with its golden fruit, its twinkling tapers, and its loads of tempting toys! As they grow older, they begin to doubt the fable, which they have been told, perhaps, of a certain Kriss-Kringle, who brings gifts for good children and is the omnipresent architect of all Christmas trees. They understand, now, why their parents,

on Christmas Eve, are so pertinacious in shutting them out of the room where the Christmas tree is to appear, all glorious, to-morrow. They peep under doors and listen on the staircase: they even, sometimes, steal in on the busy parents: till, at last, there is nothing left for it, but to put the inquisitive, excited little rebels to bed. So to bed they go, where they lie awake, talking of what they had, on last Christmas, and of what they would like to get, on this: and so gradually fall asleep, to dream of Kriss-Kringle, to wake at daylight, and to be filling the house, with glad uproar, an hour before their parents usually rise. But who would have a house, at Christmas, without children, even though the little mad-caps deafen the ears with their noisy gladness? Alas! alas! for the homes, where, this year, no little feet patter about overhead, on Christmas morning, as they did a twelve-month ago.



OUR CHRISTMAS TREE.