

"MERRY CHRISTMAS!"

BY L. P. VENEN.

And so this welcome and ever blessed reunion has come again. Mother Earth has completed yet another circuit of her vast orbit around the great central source of light and heat, scoring a full five hundred and seventy millions of miles, and here, like way-worn and weary travelers, once more have we arrived at the dearest of all old Time's relays, merry, merry Christmas.

How joyously the pleasant congratulations hie from neighbor to neighbor, from friend to friend. How like the music of fairy chimes do the very words seem to jingle as they ring forth from the pure, unsuspecting lips of childhood. Unsuspecting, do we say? Yea, and let us not break the sweet delusion; it were cruel to prematurely undeceive them and make the now happy hearts beat to the slower measure of life's cold, practical realities. We, too, were young once, and thought the great world was brimming full of holidays; or, the rather, it was one big, noisy holiday all the year round, Spring, Summer, Autumn and Winter, were almost endless cycles to us, while the golden sunshine of day and the gentle shadows of night succeeded each other like the ever varying hues in a landscape panorama.

"We were boys and girls together once, in days that slumber now,
Ere the sordid cares that cumber us had furrowed cheek and brow;
In the blessed age of innocence, when pleasure ruled the hour,
While our smiles and tears came fitfully as April sun and shower;
We were boys and girls together, then, far in the halcyon past,
But we knew not that the roses were too beautiful to last.

Then let us give full scope and vent to the tender and romantic sentimentalisms that cluster around the occasion. Disguise it as we may, there is no denying the fact that the winter holidays, *par excellence*, are fraught with associations a thousand times stronger than the iron will of the cynic or the self-pride of the traveled cosmopolitan. Childhood, maturity, and age are alike affected by it and have only to come within the sphere of its hallowed influence to succumb to the all-absorbing spirit that pervades the very air they breathe. We never wholly outgrow the faith that earnest devotion reposes in

the charming creed of early years. Its meshes may indeed be ruptured by a sounder wisdom, but the havoc of years cannot brush clean away the shreds of its silken cords. The weekly turmoil and parade of Christmas preparations, the roaring brick oven, the savory smells, the old fashioned fire-place, the long rows of waiting stockings, big and little, short and long; the midnight bodily come-down of old Santa Claus, and after all the distribution and discussion of rare baubles and gimcracks. All these are faithfully stereotyped in the memory's crumpled and musty programme, and no man, raised in a Christian home, cares at all to forget them.

The fact that the natal anniversary of Jesus Christ, at every recurrence is so religiously and zealously observed by nearly all the civilized and enlightened nations of the earth is a pungent argument in favor of the divine authenticity of that wonderful event which these popular festivities are designed to celebrate.

In searching the dingy tomes of the old chroniclers, we read that in the second century, Pope Telesphorus first instituted the religious observance of our Savior's birthday; but as no definite time was assigned to it, the celebration was for a long period included in the category of moveable feasts. A little further on we are told that, in the fourth century, St. Cyril, of Jerusalem, in order to deduce authorized system from the conflict of dates, prevailed upon Pope Julius I., to issue a call for a council of the best theologians, that they might investigate the question as to the exact day on which Christ was born. Learned and pious delegates from the East and West met together in solemn deliberation, making signal use of the "tables of the sensors," preserved in the the archives at the city of Rome. The result of this council fixed the birth of Christ on, what would be according to the new style, the 25th of December, and that memorable decision has remained intact down to the present day.

From grand ceremonious displays of much solemnity, earnestness and beauty, Christmas feast days began at an early day to degenerate in staidness and dignity until, during the middle ages, they amounted to little more among the populace of many cities,

than fantastic parade and gay festivity. The custom of decorating churches with evergreens and erecting Christmas trees seems to have been an outgrowth of early Druidical practices. Branches of rosemary, holly, ivy, bay, laurel and mistletoe were largely used, while a yew tree was generally chosen to bloom with a showy array of little torches and bear its annual load of presents. To "kiss under the rose," "whisper under the mistletoe," etc., are among the phrases incident to the old Christmas games of the North. The following excerpt explains itself:

"Bring holly-branch and mistletoe,
Fast intertwine and hang them low,
For loves own mystic power."

St. Nicholas, a real character and patron of Russia, flourished in the third century. As Bishop of Myra in Licia, he suffered persecution under Diocletian. This personage, known among the children of all Christendom as "*Saint Nick*," "*Santa Claus*," "*Knecht Rupert*" and "*Kriss Kringle*," is regarded by common consent, as the undisputed master of ceremonies and dispenser of presents at Christmas-tide the wide world over.

In proof of the assumption that the children have pretty good authority for their pleasing conceits, it may be noted that St. Nicholas died in the month of December, either during the holiday season itself, or very near that period, and also that his name was early associated with Christmas doings by the fathers of the church. Justinian dedicated a chapel to him, in Constantinople, about the year A. D. 560. He was revered by the people of the Western Empire in the 10th century and has been honored in various ways throughout Scandinavia, ever since the 12th century. In the Greek Church he ranks next to the great fathers.

Christmas carols have been written in many languages and scattered broadcast over the world like leaves in autumn. The following lines, though in blank verse, may serve as a specimen:

"A comely maiden, young and pure
As dewy globule, ray of light, or breath
That stirred in wanton playfulness her locks,
Saluted as the blessed of her race
And overshadowed by the Holy Ghost!
And born to her, e'en undefiled, by strange
Conception which till then had never blessed
The womb of womankind, a sinless babe!
Sweet child of lowly birth, and yet whose line
Of royal lineage proclaimed him Prince
Of Heav'n's, the first born son of God!"