

Christmastide

To each and all of our readers
we heartily extend the time-honor-
ed English greeting;

A MERRY CHRISTMAS!

Wrapp'd in His swaddling bands,
And in His manger laid,
The Hope and Glory of all lands
Is come to the world's aid:
No peaceful home upon His cradle
smil'd,
Guests rudely went and came where
slept the royal Child.

But where Thou dwellest, Lord,
No other thought should be,
Once duly welcom'd and ador'd,
How should I part with Thee?
Bethlehem must lose Thee soon, but
Thou wilt grace
The single heart to be Thy sure abid-
place. —KEBLE.

CHRISTMAS THOUGHTS.

Christmas bells are ringing out the sacred, weird, hallowing tone which belongs to the day. A waft of the old Christmas hymns and Christmas carols and Christmas texts comes with them: there is that cadence of "Wonderful Counsellor, the Mighty God, the Prince of Peace;" there is the chorus—burst—"unto us a Child is born, unto us a Son is given;" there is that ever-fascinating story made weirdly real today, the story of the silver star in the East, guiding those grave, wise kings to that manger where the Divine Babe lies among the oxen. Oh! that Eastern night! we have often heard of it, but now, on Christmas Eve, it seems as though we had seen it; the broad, still moon—the piercing stars,—the heavy, drooping palm-leaves,—the grey, stunted olives,—the clustered or scattered sheep,—the shepherds, some asleep and some half drowsy. And suddenly that unearthly light, that makes the moon's bright, severe rays turbid and dull; that sweet and marvellous solace, a voice, in satisfaction and in suggestion infinitely beyond earth's utmost perfection speaking for the first time those good tidings, the Gospel, the Birth at last of the Saviour of the world! And suddenly—something as the full peal bursts into the air from the solitary bell—voice or two in the tower—suddenly, at the word, the irrepressible angel—host, unable, simply unable to hold back their ecstasy

of congratulation—a gleaming throng, whiter than moonlight, but not so cold,—making the moonlight dim—a full radiance on earth—a spiral radiance, lighting up the heaven—a scattered dazzling gleam, flashing down here and there, and then that ecstatic chorus—

"Peace and goodwill, goodwill and Peace,
Peace and goodwill to all mankind!"

Yes, of all that wondrous Life, the beginning has, naturally, the greatest charm for us.

Let, then, this day, and this season, be to us holy days as well as holidays! Let our employments and enjoyments never be antagonistic to, but rather suggestive of the season's religious rejoicing. Let us strive to give Christmas that charm to the young—that one charm of which older years can never rob it; and, amid the brotherhood assembled round the fire, shut not out that Brother who was slain on Christmas Day; amid the friendly circle, let us give the place of honor to Him, who, by solemn words and solemn deeds, has preferred His claims to our love. Thus, and thus only, can we hope to have a Happy Christmas!

CHRISTMAS CUSTOMS.

Christmastide has, for so many centuries, been surrounded by the golden halo of romance, that it is now no easy task to separate fact from fiction, to distinguish between the real and the ideal. The great truth which this season commemorates—the Incarnation of the Eternal Son of God—is itself so entirely beyond human comprehension, that there could hardly fail to be associated with the festival much that partakes of the supernatural. Man is ever hankering after an understanding of the mysterious; and so it has come to pass that, in his efforts towards that end, he has evolved certain notions and beliefs, which as one age succeeded another, gathered to themselves accretions, till the original truth was well-nigh obscured. Everyone is familiar with the quotation from "Hamlet:"

"Some say, that ever 'gainst that
season comes

Wherein our Saviour's birth is celebrated,

The bird of dawning singeth all night long;

And then, they say, no spirit can walk abroad;

The night's are wholesome; then no planets strike,

No fairy takes, nor witch hath power to charm,
So hallowed and so gracious is the time."

These lines of the great dramatist give in a most remarkable way the glow, the tender warm light, the almost weird fascination, with which, to the English mind at least, the idea of Christmas is haloed about. In a special sense this festival may be called the English feast, more universally regarded and more joyous than even Easter. To a great extent, this is owing to its close connection in the minds of Englishmen with the gathering of kindred and the dearness of Home;—but, there are also many quaint, old-world traditions, which help to make an English Christmas a something to look forward to, a something to think about after it is past.

The history of the keeping of Christmas is a very interesting one. In pre-Christian days, the great feast of Saturn was observed in December, when the heathen temples were decorated with evergreens; and, when Christianity took the place of heathenism, many old customs were adapted to the new Faith. Among the northern nations of Europe, the Holly Tree was used in the adornment of the temples; after they came to know Christ, that tree was called "Christ's thorn," and special significance was attached to the fact that the holly put forth its bright scarlet berries at the very time of Christ's nativity.

Who has not heard of Santa Claus? What child has not hung up his stockings on Christmas Eve, to be ready for the gifts that the benevolent old gentleman was expected to bring? Wisacres sneer at this childish credulity, and never think of asking how the custom originated. Again we turn to the Teutons of the north of Europe and their Russian neighbors; and we learn that St. Nicholas, whose festival occurs in December, used in his lifetime to throw purses of money in at the windows of poor maidens, to be used by them as marriage portions; and, in time, as the greater festival overshadowed the lesser, it also absorbed its customs.

The Christmas tree, which takes an important place in the religious ceremonies of the Danes and Scandinavians and which plays no inconsiderable part in our social functions, is not of Christian origin, but comes from Egypt, where it is found at a date long anterior to the Christian era.

The term Yule is often used as syn-