

ASHEVILLE, N. C., SUNDAY MORNING, DECEMBER 8, 1907.

A VISIT FROM ST. NICHOLAS



THE HISTORY OF A POPULAR CHRISTMAS POEM

ON Dec. 23, 1823, there appeared in the Troy (N. Y.) Sentinel a poem which has had a remarkable popularity. As a purely secular treatment of the Christmas theme "A Visit From St. Nicholas" has no rival in the hearts of the American people. It is accepted universally as the most adequate expression of the holiday spirit as it is understood by the children of America—by those, that is, who have not been robbed by the flight of time or the mischievous interferences of their siders of their faith in the good St. Nicholas.

Viewed constructively and according to the accepted standard of poetic form, "A Visit From St. Nicholas" falls far short of perfection. As a specimen of versification it is decidedly crude, and it violates more than one of the plain rules for the guidance of the verse maker. Some of the most modern writers of America produce lines that are infinitely better adapted to scanion.

So the charm is not in the workmanship, but in the sentiment and in the cheery holiday briskness that animate the poem from beginning to end. It rings true upon the childish understanding, and it appeals directly to those for whom it was written without the necessity of further interpretation. It excites the fancy of children with a simplicity and directness that are all convincing to the wondering child and are almost potent enough to thrill the sophisticated grownup.

The poem was not written for publication. It was printed without the consent or knowledge of its author, and he was properly indignant when it appeared in spite of his expressed desire to let it go no farther than his own family circle. He composed it on Christmas eve, 1823, and read it from the manuscript to his delighted children as they were hanging up their stockings in anticipation of the customary visit of the Christmas saint. An indiscreet relative who was present was so impressed by the reading and the effect produced on the children that she obtained a copy of the verses and sent them to a friend. Thence they passed through various appreciative hands, finding their way the next year into public print.

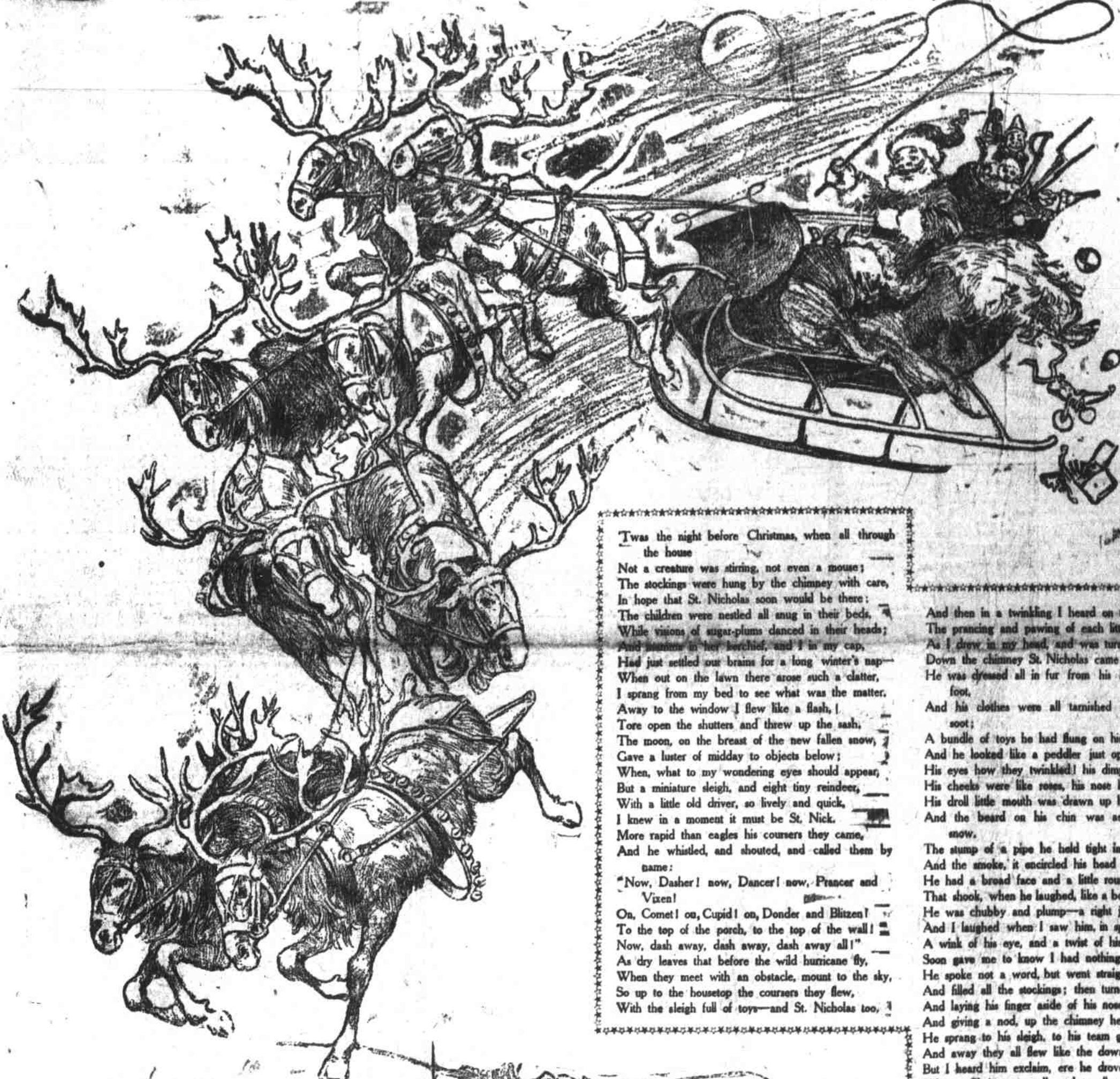
The success of the poem was instantaneous. Although the season of Yuletide was over for that year "A Visit From St. Nicholas" found its way into almost every publication in the land, and in an incredibly short period it became familiar to Americans in all parts of the country. Long before the passing of its author it had become the most widely known and most frequently quoted Christmas poem in the language.

There was good reason why its author, Clement Clarke Moore, preferred to limit its circulation to his own domestic circle. First of all, at the time of the writing of the "Jingle" he was a grave and very learned professor of Biblical learning in a theological seminary. It did not accord with his idea of professional dignity to have his name in such intimate connection with an effort which he regarded as unworthy his very considerable reputation as a Hebraist and Hebrew scholar. He had already compiled a Hebrew and English lexicon which was beginning to make its way among scholars, and he feared that the Christmas rhymes would work to the disadvantage of the dictionary.

There was still another reason—and to Professor Moore it was an exceedingly important one—why his name should not appear in too close company with the carelessly built poem beginning "Twas the night before Christmas." He had the reputation among his pupils and fellow instructors of being a maker of absolutely perfect verse. In the days before his graduation at Columbia, and even as a child in the home of his scholarly father, Benjamin Moore, who exercised the double function of bishop of the Protestant Episcopal diocese of New York and president of Columbia, the future theological professor had shown a good deal of talent for the making of poetry. He had such a poor opinion of the Christmas piece that he trembled for the consequences when he realized that it had been discovered and announced to the world as his author.

According to a lineal descendant of Professor Moore, from whom these facts concerning the authorship of "A Visit From St. Nicholas" have been obtained, he was so distressed over the matter and so apprehensive of a loss of influence over his pupils that he did not meet his class for several weeks and at one time was on the point of resigning his position. From this radical move he was dissuaded fortunately by a letter from a literary man in whose judgment he had great confidence. This opportune correspondent wrote enthusiastically of the Christmas poem and predicted that it would have unusual popularity.

It was all contrary to the professor's own opinion, but he soon began to realize that the public did not agree with him. It was another case of waking up to find himself famous. It was a fame which he had neither coveted nor courted, but he accepted the popular verdict, and when in 1844 he published a collection of his poems "A Visit From St. Nicholas" was not omitted. The author survived the unauthorized publication of his poem for more than forty years, and its popularity never waned during his lifetime. He occupied the chair of oriental languages in the General Theological seminary, New York city, until the middle of the last century and was instrumental in the building up of that institution. He gave the land on which the present imposing building stand. C. E. HUNTINGTON.



'Twas the night before Christmas, when all through the house Not a creature was stirring, not even a mouse; The stockings were hung by the chimney with care, In hope that St. Nicholas soon would be there: The children were nestled all snug in their beds, While visions of sugar-plums danced in their heads; And mamma in her 'kerchief, and I in my cap, Had just settled our brains for a long winter's nap— When out on the lawn there arose such a clatter, I sprang from my bed to see what was the matter. Away to the window I flew like a flash, I tore open the shutters and threw up the sash, The moon, on the breast of the new fallen snow, Gave a luster of midday to objects below; When, what to my wondering eyes should appear, But a miniature sleigh, and eight tiny reindeer, With a little old driver, so lively and quick, I knew in a moment it must be St. Nick. More rapid than eagles his coursers they came, And he whistled, and shouted, and called them by name: "Now, Dasher! now, Dancer! now, Prancer and Vixen! On, Comet! on, Cupid! on, Dunder and Blitzen! To the top of the porch, to the top of the wall! Now, dash away, dash away, dash away all!" As dry leaves that before the wild hurricane fly, When they meet with an obstacle, mount to the sky, So up to the housetop the coursers they flew, With the sleigh full of toys—and St. Nicholas too,!

And then in a twinkling I heard on the roof The prancing and pawing of each little hoof, As I drew in my head, and was turning around, Down the chimney St. Nicholas came with a bound. He was dressed all in fur from his head to his foot, And his clothes were all tarnished with ashes and soot; A bundle of toys he had flung on his back, And he looked like a peddler just opening his pack. His eyes how they twinkled! his dimples how merry; His cheeks were like roses, his nose like a cherry; His droll little mouth was drawn up like a bow, And the beard on his chin was as white as the snow. The stump of a pipe he held tight in his teeth, And the smoke, it circled his head like a wreath. He had a broad face and a little round belly That shook, when he laughed, like a bowl full of jelly. He was chubby and plump—a right jolly old elf; And I laughed when I saw him, in spite of myself, A wink of his eye, and a twist of his head, Soon gave me to know I had nothing to dread. He spoke not a word, but went straight to his work, And filled all the stockings; then turned with a jerk, And laying his finger aside of his nose, And giving a nod, up the chimney he rose. He sprang to his sleigh, to his team gave a whistle, And away they all flew like the down of a thistle; But I heard him exclaim, ere he drove out of sight, "Happy Christmas to all, and to all a goodnight!"

