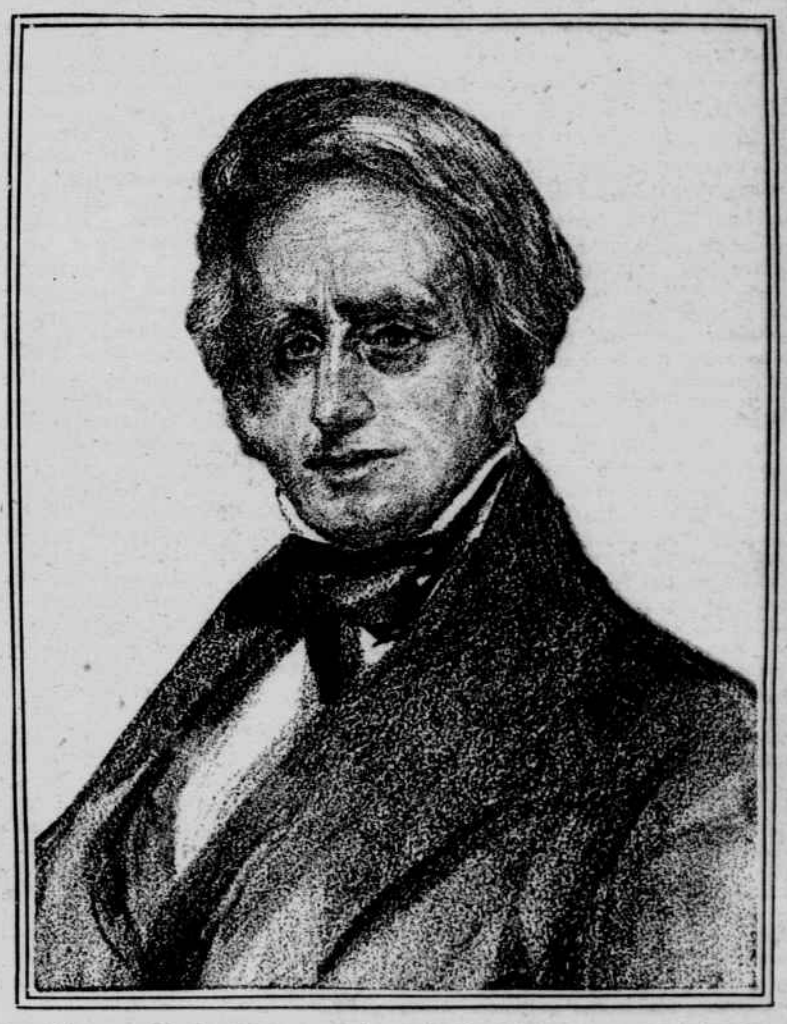
The Centenary of "'Twas the Night Before Christmas"

THIS year and month mark the centenary of Clement Clarke Moore's "A Visit from St. Nicholas," better known as "'Twas the Night Before Christmas," for the poem, which at the Yuletide season has thrilled the hearts of so many generations of youth, was written on the evening of December 23, 1822. Far from what were considered the regions of bustle and turmoil in the pleasant old New York of one hundred years ago there was, beyond Greenwich Village, a suburb known as Chelsea. There, at a spot which is now approximately Ninth avenue and Twenty-second street, there was a hill, and perched on top of the hill there was an old time mansion from which the section took its name. It had been built by Clement Clarke Moore's grandfather, an English army officer, who came overseas to help the Colonist in the French and Indian wars, and who stayed to make his home in the New World.

This Englishman left his big, white house Chelsea to his daughter Charity, who married a young minister. The young minister became the second Protestant Episcopal Bishop of the Diocese of New York and the third president of Columbia College. In the big white house Clement Clarke Moore was born, July 15, 1779. All around the house on the hill were scattered the farms of the descendants of the Dutch settlers, and as a boy young Moore heard from one of the neighbors, a Dutch farmer's son, working in the garden, the legend of St. Nicholas, whose name the Dutch children had shortened to Santa Claus. An only child. Clement watched by himself for the coming of Santa Claus every Christmas Eve.

Graduated from Columbia in 1798, Clement Clarke Moore studied for the ministry, but never took orders, devoting himself to Oriental and classical literature. When he was 30 he published the first Hebrew and Greek lexicon that had ever been brought out in America. In order to print the book it was necessary to send to Philadelphia to find the Hebrew characters. Appointed professor of Biblical learning at the General Theological Seminary in 1821 he served the institution for nearly thirty years and was the donor of the ground on which the seminary still stands. He died in Newport, R. I., in 1863.

Clement Clarke Moore's grave in Trinity Cemetery at Riverside Drive and 158th street, New York city.



Dr. Clement Clarke Moore, author of "A Visit From St. Nicholas"

The famous poem, destined long to outlive the memory of his dignified classical achievements, was written for the entertainment of his own boys and girls, to whom he had passed on the story of Santa Claus and his reindeer that he had heard in his own boyhood. It was designed merely for the diversion of an evening; he had no thought of having it put into type. But visiting at the house there was a Miss Butler, on whom the lines made a great impression. She either memorized the poem or wrote it down, and a year later, when in her Troy home, sent it to the Troy *Sentinel*, in which it was printed on December 23, 1823, just a year to a day after it was written. Copied all over the country it was years before the author could be induced to father it.

A Visit From St. Nicholas

'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 hopes that Saint Nicholas soon would be there.
The children were nestled all snug in their beds,
While visions of sugarplums danced through their heads.
And Mama 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 fled like a flash,
Tore open the shutters and threw up the sash,
The moon on the breast of the new fallen snow
Gave the 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 Saint 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 Donder 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 Saint 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 Saint Nicholas came with a bound.
He was dressed all in furs 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 in 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 encircled his head like a wreath;
He had a broad face and a little round belly,
That shook when he laughed like a bowlful 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,
"Merry Christmas to all, and to all a good night."