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CHRISTMAS MEMORIES

Time was, with most of us, when Christmas Day, encircling all our limited world like a magic ring, left nothing out for us to miss or seek; bound together all our home enjoyments, affections, and hopes; grouped everyone and everything around the Christmas fire; and made the little picture, shining in our bright young eyes, complete.

But hark! The Waits are playing, and they break my childish sleep. What images do I associate with the Christmas music as I see them upon the Christmas tree? Known before all the others, keeping far apart from all the others, they gather round my little bed. An angel, speaking to a group of shepherds in a field; some travellers, with eyes uplifted, following a star; a baby in a manger; a child in a spacious temple, talking with grave men; a solemn figure, with a strong and beautiful face, raising a dead girl by the hand; again, near a city gate, calling back the son of a widow to life; a crowd of people looking through the opened roof of a chamber where he sits, and letting down a sick person on a bed, with ropes; the same, in a tempest, walking on the water to a ship, and mildly reproofing one whose courage had forsaken him: "O thou of little faith, wherefore didst thou doubt?"; again, on a high mountain, teaching a great multitude; again, with a child upon his knee, and other children round; again, restoring sight to the blind, speech to the dumb, hearing to the deaf, health to the sick, strength to the lame, knowledge to the ignorant; again, dying upon a cross, watched by armed soldiers, a thick darkness coming on and the earth beginning to shake, and only one voice heard: "Father — forgive them — they know not what they do!"

And is our life here, at the best, so constituted that, pausing as we advance at such a noticeable milestone as this great birthday, we look back on the things that never were, as naturally and as gravely as on the things that have been and are gone, or have been and still are? If it be so, and so it seems to be, must we come to the conclusion that life is little better than a dream, and little worth the loves and strivings that we crowd into it?

No! Far be such miscalled philosophy from us on Christmas Day! Nearer and closer to our hearts be the Christmas spirit, which is the spirit of active usefulness, perseverance, cheerful discharge of duty, kindness, and forbearance. It is in the last virtues especially that we are, or should be, strengthened by the unaccomplished visions of our youth; for who shall say that they are not our teachers to deal gently even with the impalpable nothings of the earth!

Therefore, as we grow older, let us be more thankful that the circle of our Christmas associations and of the lessons that they bring, expands. Let us welcome every one of them, and summon them to take their place by the Christmas hearth.

Welcome, old aspirations, glittering creatures of an ardent fancy, to your shelter underneath the holly! We know you, and have not outlived you yet. Welcome, old projects and old loves, however fleeting, to your nooks among the steadier lights that burn around us. Welcome, all that was ever real to our hearts; and for the earnestness that made you real, thanks to Heaven. You shall hold your cherished places in our Christmas hearts, and by our Christmas fires; for in the season of immortal hope, and on the birthday of immortal mercy, we will shut out nothing.

CHARLES DICKENS
(1812-1870).