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CHURCH OF THE NATIVITY — THE GROTTO OF THE MANGER

Bethlehem
THE BIRTHPLACE OF JESUS.

Field of the Shepards, Bethlehem.

AT THIS season of the year, the Christian world reverently turns to the little town of Bethlehem and lovingly recalls the story of the Savior's birth as set forth in the simple yet beautiful language of the gospel narrative. In spirit let us go over to Bethlehem and view the place where Christ the Lord was born.

Bethlehem is situated about six miles south of Jerusalem. Starting from Jerusalem by the Jaffa gate, the journey is over a rough and hilly country road amid scenes that awaken in the mind reverent memories and fill the soul with loving emotions. Along this very road Christ often walked, and here and there at different turns of the road are places associated with some interesting and stirring event in the history of the people of Israel. On the west, is the Gihon valley, where Solomon was crowned and on the south-east is the valley of Hinnom, where nearby, in the field of Rephaim, King David defeated the Philistines.

But a short distance from King David's well Bethlehem greets the eye. There on a high hill it stands, with its closely clustered houses of white stone, its massive walls and towers looming forth in the brightness of the morning sun, while below is a rich valley with its green grass, olive trees and vineyards reaching up in terraces to the summit of the hill.

Charm of Bethlehem.

A mysterious charm seems to hang over the town as one looks at it from this point and reflects that this is Bethlehem, where Ruth and Boaz lived and loved, where Jesse and David lived, and where Christ, the son of God was born. What a feeling of joy comes over one as drawing nearer to the town he passes through this lovely little valley covered with olive trees and green grass, and is shown "the field of the shepherds" where the angels appeared to the lowly shepherds on the first Christmas night and announced to them the glad tidings of the Savior's birth. Leaving the roadside and crossing over to "the field of the shepherds" one looks about the peaceful valley and beholds sheep feeding there upon the grassy slopes and youthful shepherds still watching their flocks as the shepherds did in the time of Christ.

Near the field of the shepherds is the field of Boaz, where Ruth went forth to glean and where Boaz fell in love with her. It was from this union of Boaz and Ruth that the ancestors of David and Christ sprung. With the mind thus awakened by these historic spots, one journeys along to the gateway leading into the town.

Bethlehem has about 6,000 inhabitants. The streets are narrow, poorly paved, with scarcely a level stretch anywhere, while low-sized houses of stone line both sides of the streets. The lower floor of many of the houses is used for a booth or workshop, where natives are principally engaged in making rosaries or trinkets of pearl, coral and olive wood.

The inhabitants are for the most part Christians. They are bright appearing, neatly dressed and more favorably impress one than the people of Jerusalem. It is said that the blood of the crusaders flows in the veins of many of the inhabitants.

The Cave in the Rock.

Passing through the narrow streets we finally come to the church of the Nativity.

It was here that the inn stood where Mary and Joseph, footsore and weary, after their long journey, sought for lodgings' but "there was no room for them." They were obliged to seek elsewhere for some resting place. The chalk-hills of Judea are honey-combed with innumerable caves. One of these excavations, close by the inn, was used as a shelter for such beasts as the stables of the inn could not accommodate. Mary and Joseph were obliged to take shelter in this grotto. Here, amid the straw which served as bedding for the beasts, far from all assistance, on a cold winter's night, Mary, the virgin mother, gave birth to the infant Savior.

This cave is established beyond all doubt as the place where Christ was born. From the earliest times Christians have always kept sacred this particular spot. St. Justin, martyr born in Palestine about 100 years after Christ, speaks of this cave, and the pagan philosopher Celsus, writing A. D. 150, also knew of it. The emperor Hadrian, about 127 A. D., in order to keep the Christians away from it, erected a statue of Adonis there and established idol worship in the cavern.

The emperor Constantine removed the idol and erected over the cave a church about 330 A. D. At different periods since then the church has been rebuilt, enlarged and renovated, until we find the present structure, with its different sections belonging to the Latin, Greek and Armenian rites. The courtyard leading to the church is paved with large square stones and on the side are the ruins of old columns where the former atrium of that basilica stood. This courtyard is frequently used as a market place where the natives gather to sell their wares.

Looks Like Fortress.

The outside of the church looks like a fortress with its high stone walls.

A little door leads into the church, which is divided into three sections, belonging to the Latins, Greeks and Armenians. The first section of the church is the Greek Basilica. Here two rows of marble pillars support the roof and divide the nave into two aisles. These pillars are said to have been taken from the temple of Solomon. Along the walls are traces of ancient mosaics.

There are two entrances leading to the grotto, one by a marble staircase near the choir in the Greek section of the church, and the other from the Latin section, which is known as the church of St. Catherine.

Some few years ago this church of St. Catherine was enlarged and handsomely fitted up by the emperor of Austria.

Descending the grotto, one is reminded of the catacombs in passing, with lighted tapers, through this dark and winding cave to the various shrines and tombs hewn out of the sides.

Grotto in Limestone.

The grotto is formed in a ridge of soft limestone and is 39 feet long and from ten to twelve feet wide. It is paved with stone flags, and the walls are covered with white marble.

Turning to the right we enter a passageway to the altar of St. Eusebius of Cremona, which is built over his tomb. He was a friend of St. Jerome, and came to aid him in the founding of a monastery at Bethlehem. He afterward became the superior of it, and died in 422 A. D.

We next come to the chapel of the Tombs.

On the east side is an altar, beneath which are the tombs of St. Paula and St. Eustochium, her daughter. They were descendants of the Gracci and Scipios, and had come to Bethlehem to devote themselves to the service of God. They distributed their wealth to the poor, aided St. Jerome to build monasteries, and studied the holy scriptures under him.

In the west wall of this chapel is the tomb of St. Jerome, where an altar is also erected above his resting place. Near by is a small room known as the oratory of St. Jerome. Here the saint spent his declining years in prayer and the study of the scriptures.

Retracing our steps to the entrance of this chapel of Tombs, we come next to the altar of the Innocents. Tradition relates that here many of the mothers of Bethlehem hid themselves from the soldiers of Herod, but were discovered and their children slain. Continuing along, we are shown a small altar known as the chapel of St. Joseph, which commemorates the place where St. Joseph was warned in a dream to flee into Egypt. Over the altar is an oil painting representing the flight into Egypt.

Chapel in the Manger.

Passing through a narrow doorway, we observe a round hole in the ground, where, tradition states, a miraculous fountain burst forth for the use of the Holy Family. From here we now enter the crypt of the nativity, where golden lamps shed a soft and brilliant light upon the various shrines. With feelings of reverence and devout faith, we approach and look with wonder upon the little chapel of the Magi. Here with gifts of gold, frankincense, and myrrh, these wise men from the east knelt and adored the new-born King. Near by is another small altar ornamented with lights and silken draperies. It is the chapel of the Manger, built upon the spot where the manger stood. Here the infant Savior, wrapt in swaddling clothes, was laid. As the genuine manger was carried to Rome, a marble one now is seen where a wax image of the infant lies upon a pallet of straw.

We turn from here to another altar more richly ornamented and draped with silk and velvet curtains. The soft rays from golden lamps above flood the shrine with a glorious light. Drawing near we see a large silver star set in the marble floor beneath the low arch of the marble altar, and with awe and wonderment read upon the pavement this inscription, "Hic de Virgine Maria Jesus Christus natus est." (Here Jesus Christ was born of the Virgin Mary.)

How your heart leaps with joy as you find yourself at this sacred spot where Christ the Lord was born. With an irresistible impulse you fall upon your knees and prostrate in the radiance of these golden lamps, and in the quiet peace of this hallowed spot you think of that first Christmas night when Mary and Joseph sought shelter within this cave, where, her days being accomplished, she gave birth to the Savior of mankind.

A Christmas Prayer

By Charles Wagner

Beloved Father, while all Christendom kneels around the manger of Bethlehem, send us new spirit, teach us new songs, give us the very Christmas mind. Turn the hearts of the fathers to the children and the hearts of the children to the fathers; give joy to the hopeless, bring into the right way those who are going astray, give confidence to the trembling ones, free bounded hearts, open blind eyes and unstop deaf ears. As on this day we make the hearts of the little ones joyous, so, O Merciful Father, let us all become children again, with simple faith, with trustful hearts, with ready wills, with pure endeavor.

And this blessed birthday of Jesus shall become the birthday of a new creation and awaken among us a spirit which beareth all things, believeth all things, loveth all things. Amen.

FESTIVAL OF THE NATIVITY.

Was Observed at Very Early Time in History of Church.

The festival of Christmas was observed at a very early period in the church, as indeed it could hardly but be; for that which brought the joy of angels within reach of men's ears could not but have been devoutly and joyously remembered by Christians, year by year, when they came fully to understand the greatness of the event. It is most fit that the season so marked out by angels by songs of joy, such as had not been heard on earth since the creation, should also be observed as a time of festive gladness by the church, and in the social life of Christians. Christ Himself instituted this festival when He sanctified the day by then first revealing His human nature to the eyes of mankind. The holy angels witnessed to its separation forever as a day of days, when they proclaimed the glory that was then offered to God in the highest by the restoration of perfect manhood in the virgin-born Jesus, and the peace that was brought among men on earth through the reunion of their nature to God.

It is to the nativity of our Lord that all the pages of the Bible point as the center on which everything there recorded turns.

Sweetest and Happiest Day.

Christmas, the sweetest and happiest day of all seasons, the day when the Prince of Peace entered upon the walks of men to shape anew the destinies of the race, the day set aside for giving and receiving of gifts, draws near, and the merriment and joy suggested in the jingle of Kris Kringle's sleigh bells already pervade the atmosphere, and again is echoed the glad song the angels sang over sleeping Bethlehem, "Peace on earth, good will toward men."

Centuries Ago

by

Alfred Domett

It was the calm and silent night!
Seven hundred years and fifty-three
Had Rome been growing up to might,
And now was queen of land and sea.
No sound was heard of clashing wars,
Peace brooded o'er the hushed domain;
Apollo, Pallas, Jove and Mars
Held undisturbed their ancient reign
In the solemn midnight,
Centuries ago.

'Twas in the calm and silent night,
The senator of haughty Rome,
Impatient urged his chariot's flight
From lordly revel rolling home;
Triumphal arches, gleaming, swell
His breast with thoughts of boundless sway;
What recked the Roman what befell
A paltry province far away,
In the solemn midnight,
Centuries ago?

Within that province far away
Went plodding home a weary boor:
A streak of light before him lay,
Fallen through a half-shut stable door
Across his path. He passed, for naught
Cold what was going on within;
How keen the stars, his only thought—
The air how calm, and cold and thin,
In the solemn midnight,
Centuries ago!

It is the calm and silent midnight!
A thousand bells ring out, and throw
Their joyous peals abroad, and smite
The darkness—charmed and holy now!
The night that erst no name had worn—
To it a happy name is given;
For in that stable lay, new-born,
The Peaceful Prince of earth and heaven,
In the solemn midnight,
Centuries ago.

ON CHRISTMAS EVE

GRANDFATHER LOOKS BACK OVER YEARS THAT ARE GONE.

Compares Holiday Scenes of Long Ago with Those of Modern Days—The Part of Science in Our Celebrations.

It was near the stroke of midnight. The lights had been burned out in the great front room hiding the gorgeousness of the tree whose glittering branches bent with the weight of gifts. One by one the family had said "good night," but grandfather lighted his beloved pipe and sat down by the glowing embers of the grate fire and let his mind wander backward 60 years, and here is what he saw:

A little lad of ten in red-top, brass-toed boots, his first pair, a rosy apple in his pocket and a stick of peppermint candy in his hand, his Christmas gifts. And he was to be allowed to ride his pony to the chase. Here he waited this crisp Christmas day on the broad piazza of the old Kentucky home.

Afterward there was the sumptuous dinner, with open-handed and whole-souled hospitality, for which his family had been noted.

Then there came a succession of such Christmases, followed by the gay college holidays, where the mistletoe played a prominent part in the festivities of Christmas week.

Next came five years in the war. Still one or two Christmases came vividly to his mind, the one in New Orleans, when the city forgot her woes and even welcomed the fascinating young officers who spent their money with such prodigality at the bazaars and fairs which were in full blast on Christmas night.

He touched his silk smoking cap lovingly as he recalled the mother superior who gave it to him with her blessing, though she had kept a watchful eye upon the young captain as he promenaded with the pretty convent belles. Yes, that Christmas in New Orleans was a unique experience.

The next two holidays found him on the field with little time to think or even remember that it was the Christmas season. But after this gray monotony came the realization of his life's dream, a home of his own, and then began an unbroken series of Christmas trees covering 20 years.

With what pomp and ceremony the tree was selected, cut down, brought home and set up in the bay window. These later days trees purchased at the grocer's and the Christmas greens sold by the pound seemed very commonplace to grandfather. He always said: "But the trees of to-day are poor affairs compared with what my children had."

Then, after the three babies had been put to bed, how he and mother always worked till midnight transforming the tree into a thing of beauty, with its homestrung popcorn and cranberries, the tarlatan stockings and always a doll in the topmost branches. Now the popcorn was bought by the yard, the tarlatan stockings likewise, electricity lighted the branches and the excitement of watching the candles was all over.

Everything now was on the most scientific plan. Even Santa Claus had abandoned his eight tiny reindeer and was making his rounds in an automobile.

Yet some people did not have Christmas trees these days, because it was so much work! Grandfather sighed.

"Well, times have changed. Here our three babies are trimming the tree for their babies. How strange."

And the old man knocked the ashes from his pipe, went into the front room, pushed the button, revealing the tree in all its magnificence. The dollhouse completely furnished with every conceivable contrivance, the cook stove that really cooked, the fire engine apparatus that to-morrow would go pellmell over the house, the sure-enough automobile with its horn to warn the neighbors to look out for their lives—such numerous things that grandfather's eyes were bewildered and his head swam. What was there left for the children of the next generation! Were these gratified, indulged youngsters any happier, any better, than the little lad of 60 years ago whose presents consisted of a red apple and a stick of candy?

Then grandfather turned out the lights, put up his pipe and slowly ascended the staircase, stepped quietly along the hall to see that all was well, then opened grandmother's door and silently hung a piece of mistletoe from the gas jet, for it was just 50 years since he had kissed her and told her the old, sweet story. And in a few hours she would waken, the house would resound with merry laughter and grandfather would dismantle the burdened tree, would settle all difficulties, join in the old-time Christmas carols that were always sung, and dance in the merry circle.

There would be the dinner, with a dear little flaxen-haired grandchild on either side of grandfather, each clamoring for the drumstick; after that the dear grown-up children would say good-by and take the tired little ones home, and he and grandmother would sit together and say "Another Christmas, and our little circle still unbroken. Thank God for that, for it's the children that keep our hearts young."

And the curtain would fall, shutting out the long procession of Christmases, and he and grandmother would begin to plan as they always did "as to what they would do next year."

Just Now.

The coming man—Santa Claus.—Philadelphia Bulletin.

WHEN SANTA CAME BY WATER

BY CLYDE ALISON MANN

Capt. Riley was intently watching from his net-loft window the approach of his biggest fishing tug, the Alice Riley. Even in the inner harbor she was pitching and rolling in the December seas and was sheathed in ice from bobbing timber head to the overhang aft.

"Not a boxful, not one," he groaned, seeing the nested fish boxes still lashed to the deckhouse roof. "But the boys 'll get their pay, somehow; they'll get it, if I have to slap a mortgage on all the outfit." No one else should know it, but the truth was Christmas cheer was not in Capt. Riley's heart as he turned gravely to the twine-reeling he had busied himself with since he broke his ankle and Billy Noonan had proudly taken out the Alice Riley, the most powerful tug that fished off Skilligalee in the Straits of Mackinac.

The tug tied up to the dock with a bump, there was some shouting, heavy footsteps clumping on the icy wharf, then up the shaky stairs and the door flew open letting in a blast of raw north wind and an ice-coated being in oil skins who presently shed his chrysalis and became a crestfallen skipper, a curly-haired, alert young fellow, who almost hugged the roaring stove, for he was drenched and shivering.

"Not a pound, cap'n," was his greeting. "Breezed up so we couldn't touch the nets," he added.

"Old Michigan must be cuttin' up considerable," the old man answered cheerily. "Never mind, boy, ye'll get 'em next time."

But Billy Noonan knew how bad the fishing had been all year, and could figure as well as his employer how bad matters must be. Not a man of them

Got a Line to Her.

all but loved the grizzled old man, and marveled at him, for he knew the lake bottom from Point Betsie to the great log rollway that scarred the bluffs north of Waugoshance light, as most men know dry land. Billy Noonan, however, also loved the old captain's daughter, Mary, and had hoped—how he had hoped!—to bring in a big catch of whitefish when he was given the big tug to lift the last nets of the year. Now a lean Christmas, a very lean Christmas, seemed certain in the Riley home—a home for all homeless lads at Christmas time. Mary's laugh had been infrequent of late and her merriment had been forced.

Here she was herself in the doorway as the crew clumped in. "Billy Noonan," she called, "don't you know you'll swamp the tug with the fish jammed to the gunwalls, so?" There was a note in her raillery that cut him to the quick. How queenly she was, this straight, blue-eyed brunette, wrapped in the captain's oilskins, flushed from facing the storm!

Billy Noonan lay awake that night, notwithstanding the long day at the wheel of the lurching tug. Through his window he stared out at the blackness, and he listened to the wailing wind; wailing, it seemed to him, complaint at the year of misfortunes and pitiful catches of fish, wailing complaint at the wages and prices of fish fixed by the union that made the lot of Capt. Riley so hard in an "off" year. Far out on the Charlevoix pier no white light shone, up and down the angry lake the lighthouses and lightships were nowhere else on watch, the fog signals were silent, although belated barges still stumbled up and down the lake. Suddenly a flash in the north, and another and another, the flash of rockets, brought him out of bed.

"This side o' Waugoshance, about White Shoals," he calculated. "Bad place with this wind."

He shook his bed-fellow, Kelly, the fireman, and finally roused him.

"Get out Kell, someone's in trouble near the straits and maybe the Alice Riley can get a line to her first." Kelly knew what that would mean, at least $400 a day for "the old man," and he knew the need.

Everyone said the Alice Riley had an uncommon crew; two hours later the tug's whistle blew four booming blasts in the darkness—"strong ahead" —and five more that were Billy's farewell to Mary if she was awake—or cared. She saw from her bedroom window the tug steam through the channel, sparks flying weirdly in the wind, out to the open lake where no light shone to mark the way for the 30 miles of desperate tussle with waves that now at times buried the very deckhouse roof. Again the five short blasts as the starboard light turned north beyond the pier, then was gone.

"Here's hopin'," growled Billy as he whirled the wheel over. He was hanging on grimly, for at times the tug stood about on end. A sea smashed one of the pilot-house windows and he fixed it as best he could by the dim binnacle light. He lashed the wheel to a course two points east of north. In the blackness he could see only the white crests of waves. The panting of the tug's exhaust told him Kelly was stoking like a fiend and that O'Neil was squeezing the last ounce out of his big engine, 16 square. Ahead was blackness, the maddened waters and the infrequent flash of rockets.

It was still dark when Billy saw, as the tug topped a great wave, a ship's light ahead twinkle a moment where the whitecaps marked White Shoals. At dawn he had a line to the derelict and the great seven-inch hauser was going to her overside; an hour later they were fast by the forward towing post. It would be easy in such a sea to trip on the hauser and "turn turtle," or to be snatched by a great wave and have the hauser break. The barge on the shoal was an ore freighter loaded to the water's edge, a heavy tow.

With his hand on the bell cord to signal to O'Neil, Billy muttered: "Here's for Mary and better—"

He rang, the engines started, then, crash! Billy's Christmas wishes were cut short; the tow post was gone and water poured into the hole in torrents. It was hours later when they got that hauser again, when the tug's hoarse whistle roared, "All right," and the bellow of the stranded barge replied. It was dreary work and Billy and the crew were gaunt with hunger and weariness.

Again slowly in the teeth of the wind they went ahead, jerked tremendously at intervals when the waves snatched the tow. When they were getting into deeper water O'Neil's engines suddenly stopped, and ten minutes later the barge had drifted back to the shoal. The eccentric had slipped; the tug was but driftwood; bad business in such a sea.

Billy Noonan and O'Neil kept her afloat someway, and all the time Billy, still clutching the wheel, was muttering of Mary and Christmas; he had strange vagaries, but was still sane as a skipper. When at last the frantic hammering in the engine room ceased, near evening of the next day, they were still near to the barge that was pounding on the shoals. The sun broke through the clouds, a red sun near to setting beyond the tossing waters, the sunset of Christmas eve.

It was never clear how they got the slow steel barge to move so fast once they got her off again. But in the midnight hours when St. Nick, Kris Kringel and all the Christmas fairies were abroad on land, when the last embers of the yule logs smouldered cozily under lines of stockings in many, many homes, the Alice Riley's deep whistle sounded off the Charlevoix pier. Capt. Riley still sat before his fireplace, waiting hopefully—as was his nature. But for the hundredth time he looked about the room at Mary's pitiful efforts at Christmas decorations. Suddenly he heard, faint but unmistakable, the bass call of the Alice Riley.

Instantly he picked up his crutch and rapped on the door of Mary's room. So quickly did she appear, suspiciously red-eyed but smiling, she must have been awake, too.

"Listen," he cried, holding up his hand.

Boo-oo-oom, boooo-oom, boo-oo-oom! "All right!"

Again, deep, full and growing less faint, the whistle sounded, "All right."

"That means a Christmas for all of us, Mary, in spite of the fish!"

Then there came a succession of short, sharp toots and the captain stared perplexed. With a twinkle he turned to Mary.

"Do you know what that means Mary?" he asked.

She flushed crimson, but before she put her arms about her father with a hug that he understood she flashed her answer from the bow window with a lamp. The captain, smiling, for a long time sat looking at a picture over the mantel, the picture of her mother. "Merry Christmas," he said to the picture, very softly. "I knew it would come."

Billy brought it—and Billy had it, an unforgetable Christmas—with the Riley's. When at last he "rolled in" with Kelly, the fireman would have his joke—he called it "Mary Christmas."

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An Old English Custom.

The old country Englishman [illegible] fails to unbar his door at 12 o[illegible] New Year's eve to let the old [illegible] out and the new year in.