Christmas Greetings

A Christmas Reverie

THIS is the homing season. Also the time when photographs abound—and my mind is much taken up with both. Sallies to the scenes of other days, and snapshots of faces, some erstwhile forgotten—these are the distinguishing features of the Christmas mood.

I am sitting by a hearth fire; and all hearth fires have, somewhere in their glowing bosom, the embers of the days of yore. Quite unclassified, quite defiant of the order of time or place, these Christmas reveries meander, these Yuletide vignettes flash upon memory's screen and disappear. Fragmentary, unassorted, they yet mark the trail of the friendly years.

The first has its scene in Ottawa; year, the first of my ministerial life. Am in my room in the Victoria Chambers, seated in an armchair, and it is Christmas Eve. Knock at door; which, opened, admits a midget of a bell-boy with two little parcels in his hand, said parcels containing two pathetically cheap presents: "For Mr. Haley and Mary (elevator man and his charing daughter)—just a little Christmas gift, 'cause I can't afford very much, you see, bein' as how I only get four dollars a week and no keep—an', besides, me chum borrowed thirty cents off me to go to the lacrosse match last fall an' he ain't paid me back," the childish face showing equal parts of benevolence and financial care. Beautiful, this—and as common as beautiful—this mutual generosity of the poor.

Four years have passed; and the scene is marvelously changed. No snow now, nor chiming sleigh-bells, nor resonant sidewalk crisp beneath the hurrying feet. But the December sun is pouring down upon a picnic party in the pine woods of North Carolina, those woods re-echoing to the shout and laughter of merry voices, most of which are silent now. Soon the stroke of an axe is heard, wielded by a burly negro—and, a few minutes later, a tall holly tree crashes to the mossy ground, its deep green foliage and gleaming berries glistening in the sun. Later still, a couple of darkies loaded like beasts of burden, the holly-laden party, a few with great bundles of the mystic mistletoe, are in Indian file making their way to the boats, song re-echoing as we cross to the stately southern home, its fireplace lighted for the last hundred years and more, that crowns the river's farther bank.

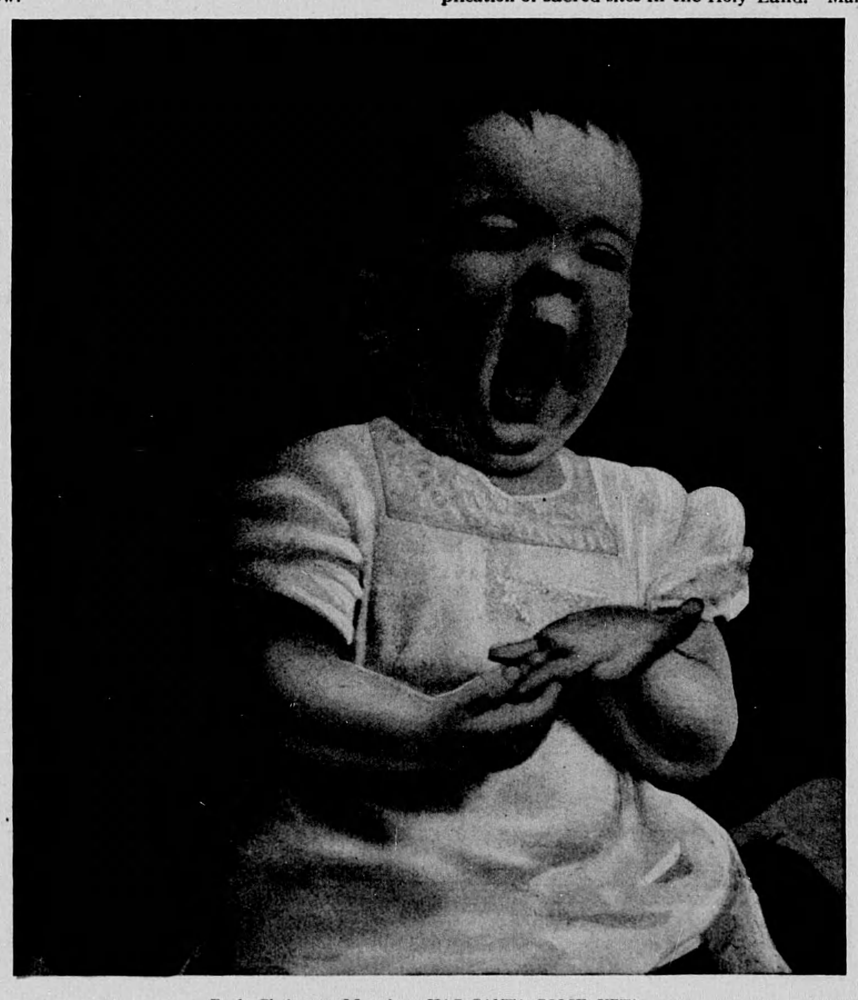
Six more years have fled, after their relentless way. I am sitting before my own fire, north again, in "the hill-girt town." We are at family worship, and in my lap there nestles a golden-curled girl of four. For nearly a week she and I had followed the course of Santa Claus: "North Pole, Ft. Churchill, Hudson Bay, Temagami, etc." I reported from time to time. But ever coming closer! Our reading that night, that trembling stocking night, is of the feeding of the five thousand, and the dialogue was as follows:

"Wasn't that kind of him, my darling, to feed all those poor, hungry people?"

"Yes," the glowing eyes averted one brief moment from the fire; "but, where do you suppose Santa Claus is now?"

Yet four more years have gone. It is Christmas here again, and I am driving back to town from a farm-house where the head of the home lies in agony, his last Christmas almost at the door. The same childish form, taller and developed now, is beside me in the cutter as we glide along, sleigh-bells merrier than their wont, stars a little brighter, mantle of snow touched with a holier sheen. Suddenly I feel the trembling of the girlish figure a little hand plucks at the sleeve of my coonskin coat, a curl-clustered head is burrowing into my side—and the sobbing of a child mingles with the music of the bells. I ask why, darkly suspecting that the cause is what I fear, that someone has given her to eat of the tree of the knowledge of fact and phantasy. It is even so—and the little form is quite shaken with grief as "This is the first Christmas that I didn't know" comes from the trembilng lips. I can only comfort and caress and murmur: "Life is full of these awakenings, my darling," and we go on thru the night that has lost, never to be restored, the wonder and the glory of a year before.

And is it not wonderful how, when we ransack the bygone years, we find, not the great and momentous things unfaded, but mostly trifling little episodes embalmed in love, and nearly all linked to the vision of some childish face.



Early Christmas Morning—HAS SANTA COME YET?

Gone now, and far away, are those childish features, and the wonder of life has retreated before its struggle. In a home of her own, too, another fire lighted upon a new-laid hearth. Thus the holy cycle goes its way. Those curls have disappeared, and the locks are darker, yet no less dear. And surely, surely, there is no reason why she should not nestle as of yore upon that great throne of childhood, a father's knee, and surely those locks could rest again where they reposed of old. I am sorely tempted. The birds find that Southern path—and why not I?

One year later still; and the peaceful happiness of a Christmas morning passes again before me. Breakfast over; a little hymn, a little prayer; a little gloating (thank God) over the rapture which I know the hurrying years are bound to shatter—and we stand athrill before the door of the room within which the laden tree awaits us. Entrance delightful as of yore—and then begins the giving and receiving. Some really beautiful gifts, no doubt, all forgotten now—but unforgotten, and unlost or mislaid through the years, a little knitted bag (to hold some articles of toilet) handed to me by proud little daughter's hands. "The very first thing I ever did, daddy," face aglow with childish pride, mine with fatherly compassion. Surely a reassuring parable of all our poor gifts and service, yet precious in larger, other eyes than ours!—R. E. Knowles.

Cradle of Christian World

Of all the clustering clouds of ravishing reminiscences associated with a world-tour of 35,000 miles, memory holds no other gem quite so delightfully exquisite as that of a visit to Bethlehem. No other spot on earth is richer in religious treasure or more radiant with romantic and well authenticated tradition. Viewed from any standpoint—topographical, historical, social or religious—Bethlehem is simply enthralling. Every change in the kaleidoscope is wondrously fascinating, and discloses a perfect picture of idyllic grace and charm. Once more, as "The Season of the Birth of Christ draws near," the imagination of the world will be centered there, catching overtones of its pastoral symphony; while the instinct of Christian millions will turn to it in tenderest affection and truest veneration. The heart of modern civilized man awakes in mystic wonder, and finds its affinity with the primitive Judean shepherd, saying, "Let us now go even unto Bethlehem."

The city walls have vanished; but the site of Bethlehem, determined by the long narrow mountain ridge, is precisely where it was 3,000 years ago. Entering the town at an elevation of 2,550 feet above the sea, the visitor has a magnificent view of the surrounding country, opening out like a panorama. To the east slopes the deep valley where Ruth "went down" in her sorrow. Over the softly rising hills to the south are the plains in whose fields she gleaned "amidst the alien corn;" where also David walked—"In glory and in joy,
Following his sheep along the mountain side."

On these plains, too, were the shepherds keeping watch over their flocks by night when the Angel of the Lord, accompanied by the Heavenly Host, announced the birth of "Christ the Lord."

Away to the horizon stand the purple hills of Moab, at whose feet in solemn stillness lie the deep blue waters of the Dead Sea. Almost immediately above the town towers Mount Jebel Fureidis, on the summit of which is the tomb of Herod the Great, of execrated memory, who, in Bethlehem at least, needs no such monument in memoriam of the Massacre of the Innocents. For miles around may be seen rich olive and fig groves intermixed with apricot orchards and vineyards each with its watch tower as in ancient times. The hillsides are cultivated in terraces of "hanging gardens," and the stony plains are ploughed for cereal crops.

The town is solidly and closely built. The streets are generally narrow, with houses of two or three storeys, constructed of yellowish-white limestone, and topped with flat roofs. The central thoroughfare is occupied by workshops, whose floors are strewn with men and material. The chief industry is the manufacture of "articles de touriste." Souvenirs in olive wood, medallions from mother-of-pearl, engravings on shell and stone of incidents from the life of our Lord, with other similar curios, are everywhere conspicuous in almost embarrassing profusion. In this art alone one-third of Bethlehem workers find employment. The remainder are shepherds, quarrymen, husbandmen, tradesmen and merchants. The population, which is estimated variously from 5,000 to 8,000, is almost entirely Christian; and, apart from the occasional outbursts of sectarian animosity, the Latin, Greek, and Armenian Churches are on enviable terms of friendship—for Eastern communities.

Boasting a strain of Crusaders' blood, the Bethlehemites are altogether the finest human type to be met with in Southern Palestine, and their sartorial appearance is primly picturesque. The men dress in a bright-colored gown over a white undershirt, the head being covered with a turban or fez. The women's chief garment is a long narrow tunic of blue cotton, tied at the waist, and relieved with a red embroidered stole. The matrons are distinguished from the maidens by a differentiating arrangement of headdress; the married ladies wearing a sort of cap adorned with gold and silver sequins—their only dower—while the spinsters display a ribbon in their hair. All the women have veils, but these are thrown back so as to fall in long, graceful lines, about the figure, to which they lend a charming dignity. The exposed face of the Bethlehemite woman is distinctly beautiful—not a brunette, but with a bright, clear complexion, large eyes, and delicately shaped mouth—and she carries herself so admirably as to appear taller than she really is.

Of course, the supreme object of interest in Bethlehem is the reputed place of the Nativity. Superstition and the emulation of jarring sects have led to the multiplication of sacred sites in the Holy Land. Many of these are doubtful, to say the least, and some are without question apocryphal. Fortunately, however, the place indicated with reverence as the Cave of the Nativity is not among these. Ancient, continuous, and well-authenticated tradition stamps this as one of the most genuine shrines in Palestine. The credibility of this tradition is supported by no less an authority than Conder, who observes in his "Tent Work in Palestine" that "the rude grotto with its rocky manger may, it seems to me, be accepted even by the most sceptical of modern explorers." Within a generation of the death of the last of the Apostles, Justin Martyr, himself a native of Nablus, speaks of the Saviour's birth as having taken place "in a certain cave close to the village." The fact of its early sacredness is demonstrated by the method taken by Hadrian (A.D. 117-138) to desecrate it by causing a grove in honor of Adonis to be planted above the cave, so that pagan wanton rites might be performed over the very spot where the Holy Child Jesus was born. This grove was subsequently cut down by Constantine in order that the Empress Helena might rear (A.D. 306-337) the basilica which is still standing there, the most ancient Christian Church in the world.

The Church of the Nativity presents the outward appearance of a fortress. The huge central doorway has been almost entirely built up, leaving the only entrance by a "needle's eye," which symbolically teaches each worshipper, at least, the virtue of humility. The interior is spacious but bare. The aisles have flat roofs above the pillars of red and white marble with Corinthian capitals, but the nave has a clerestory, with walls thirty feet above the capitals, and a pointed roof. A wall, built across the east end of the basilica, cuts off the chancel. Evidently at one time the entire church was richly adorned with gold and mosaics, of which some remnants still exist, but the ravages of time and the hand of the spoiler have left their marks. Underneath the choir, by a staircase of thirteen marble steps, the crypt containing the Chapel of the Nativity is reached. The Chapel—once a rude cave—is now paved and walled with marble, roofed with gold and silk, and lighted with fifty-three lamps. Immediately to the left is the shrine, unspeakably sacred to Christendom. From an arch about four feet high hang fifteen silver lamps, and in the centre of the floor is a silver star with the inscription "Hic de Virgine Maria Jesus Christus Natus Est."

The site itself is infinitely touching, but as I gazed upon it an unspeakable tenderness invested it by the presence of eight women robed in white praying silently and, in turn, kissing the star. I followed, and found the slab glistening with tears. Indescribably sad is it that this same silver star has a tale to tell not altogether of "peace and good-will to men!" That it should have been used as a wedge for sundering the peace of the world by war is one of those episodes the world would willingly forget to-day. To-day we stand with the wondering shepherds and worshipping magi by the spot where was witnessed the greatest event of all time—the Divine assumption of humanity. The world will never permit the tender idyll of Bethlehem to die. May it not forget the truth enshrined in the quaint old lines—

"Though Christ a thousand times in Bethlehem be born,
If He's not born in thee, thy soul is still forlorn,
Oh, would thy heart be but a manger for His birth,
God would once more become a Child upon the earth."

'Twill Never Die

The Christmas Festival of goodwill, goodfellowship, and peace has lost none of its popularity in its passage through the ages.

Nineteen hundred and twenty-five finds us welcoming it as heartily as did our ancestors a thousand years ago, before railways, telephones, radios or automobiles were even dreamed about.

It awakens dormant feelings and aspirations which the clamor of wordly life stifles and deadens.

It opens deep springs of brotherhood and love, from whence flow desires to bless with gifts and good wishes.

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A Happy and Prosperous New Year.

A Merry Christmas and Happy New Year to all.

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We appreciate the kind favor of past years and extend to you, our friends and customers, our wishes for a healthful and happy year in 1926.

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