

America's Poems of Christmas

DO YOU like poetry? Might as well ask, "Do you believe in fairies?" And that, of course, you don't, after you have been released from the spell of Peter Pan.

But Christmas poetry? Oh, that's different. Why, don't we all know "The Night Before Christmas" and "Beautiful Snow"?

There, you see, we don't know anything at all about Christmas poetry; and yet we are eager to admit we like it. "Beautiful Snow" isn't a Christmas poem at all; and ever since the other one became the delight of childish and grown-up hearts the critics have been trying to show that it can't possibly be real poetry.

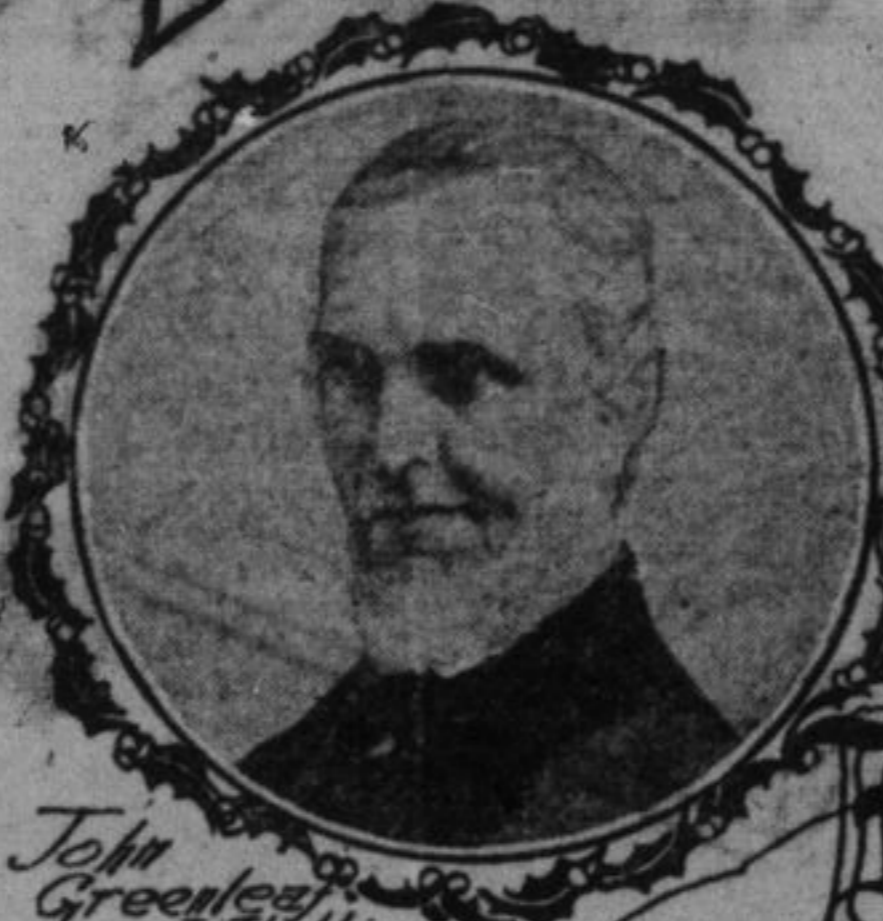
Nevertheless, we have loved that one bit of Christmas verse so well that we know it from beginning to end; and, for lack of knowing anything else, we have just kept on reciting it at the Christmas entertainments until we are almost willing to forget it again.

And meanwhile our American poets, who can touch the very core of our souls as surely as Bobbie Burns when they are willing to be homely and real, have written so many beautiful Christmas poems that it is one of our national pities we don't know scores of them instead of seldom reading one of them.

There are James Whitcomb Riley's "Who Santy-Claus Wuz" and Eugene Field's "Bethlehem Town"; and for the "higher literature," such really fine things as John Greenleaf Whittier's "Star of Bethlehem," Henry Wadsworth Longfellow's "Christmas Carol," Edmund Clarence Steadman's "Guests at Yule," and Richard Watson Gilder's "Christmas Hymn."

And then there are scores and scores of others; as if we Americans were fairly inspired to sing when joyful Christmas comes around.

A prosaic, practical, money-grubbing lot, we Americans; but there are not so very many other nations that can show better Christmas poetry than we have ready to grace our festival with.



John Greenleaf Whittier

The Star of Bethlehem

WHERE Time the measure of his hours
By changeful bud and blossom keeps,
And, like a young bride crowned with flowers,
Fair Shiraz in her garden sleeps;

Where, to her poet's turban stone,
The Spring her gift of flowers imparts,
Less sweet than those his thoughts have sown
In the warm soil of Persian hearts:

There sat the stranger, where the shade
Of scattered date-trees thinly lay,
While in the hot clear heaven delayed
The long and still and weary day.

Strange trees and fruits above him hung,
Strange odors filled the sultry air,
Strange birds upon the branches swung,
Strange insect voices murmured there.

And strange bright blossoms shone around,
Turned sunward from the shadowy bowers,
As if the Gheber's soul had found
A fitting home in Iran's flowers.

What'er he saw, what'er he heard,
Awakened feelings new and sad,
No Christian garb, nor Christian word,
Nor church with Sabbath-bell chimes glad,

But Moslem graves, with turban stones,
And mosque-spires gleaming white, in view,
And graybeard Mollahs in low tones
Chanting their Koran service through.

The flowers which smiled on either hand,
Like tempting fiends, were such as they,
Which once, o'er all that Eastern land,
As gifts on demon altars lay.

As if the burning eye of Baal
The servant of his Conqueror knew,
From skies which knew no cloudy veil,
The Sun's hot-glances smote him through.

"Ah me!" the lonely stranger said,
"The hope which led my footsteps on,
And light from heaven around them shed,
O'er weary wave and waste, is gone!"

"Where are the harvest fields all white,
For Truth to thrust her sickle in?
Where flock the souls, like doves in flight,
From the dark hiding-place of sin?"

"A silent horror broods o'er all,
The burden of a hateful spell,
The very flowers around recall
The hoary magi's rites of hell!"

"And what am I, o'er such a land
The banner of the Cross to bear?
Dear Lord, uphold me with Thy hand,
Thy strength with human weakness share!"

He ceased; for at his very feet
In mild rebuke a floweret smiled:
How thrilled his sinking heart to greet
The Star-flower of the Virgin's child!

Sown by some wandering Frank, it drew
Its life from alien air and earth,
And told to Paynim sun and dew
The story of the Saviour's birth.

From scorching beams, in kindly mood,
The Persian plants its beauty screened,
And on its pagan sisterhood,
In love, the Christian floweret leaned.

With tears of joy the wanderer felt
The darkness of his long despair
Before that hallowed symbol melt,
Which God's dear love had nurtured there.

From Nature's face, that simple flower
The lines of sin and sadness swept;
And Magian pile and Paynim bower
In peace like that of Eden slept.

Each Moslem tomb, and cypress old,
Looked holy through the sunset air
And, angel-like, the Muezzin told
From tower and mosque the hour of prayer.

With cheerful steps, the morrow's dawn
From Shiraz saw the stranger part;
The Star-flower of the Virgin-Born
Still blooming in his hopeful heart!

A Christmas Carol



Henry W. Longfellow

I HEAR along our street
Pass the minstrel throngs;
Hark! they play so sweet,
On their hautboys, Christmas songs!
Let us by the fire
Ever higher
Sing them till the night expire!

In December ring
Every day the chimes;
Loud the gleemen sing
In the streets their merry rhymes.
Let us by the fire
Ever higher
Sing them till the night expire.

Shepherds at the grange,
Where the Babe was born,
Sang, with many a change,
Christmas carols until morn.
Let us by the fire
Ever higher
Sing them till the night expire!



Richard Watson Gilder

Christmas Hymn

TELL me what is this innumerable throng
Singing in the heavens a loud angelic song?
These are they who come with swift and shining feet
From round about the throne of God the Lord of Light
to greet.

Oh, who are these that hasten beneath the starry sky,
As if with joyful tidings that through the world shall fly?
The faithful shepherds these, who greatly were afear'd,
When, as they watched their flocks by night, the heavenly
host appeared.

Who are these that follow across the hills of night
A star that westward hurries along the fields of light?
Three wise men from the east who myrrh and treasure
bring
To lay them at the feet of him their Lord and Christ and
King.

What babe new-born is this that in a manger cries?
Near on her bed of pain his happy mother lies.
Oh, see! the air is shaken with white and heavenly
wings—
This is the Lord of all the earth, this is the King of
kings.

Tell me, how may I join in this holy feast
With all the kneeling world, and I of all the least?
Fear not, O faithful hearts, but bring what most is meet
Bring love alone, true love alone, and lay it at his feet.

Guests At Yule



Edmund Clarence Steadman

NOEL! NOEL!
Thus sounds each Christmas bell
Across the winter snow.
But what are the little footprints all
That mark the path from the churchyard wall?
They are those of the children waked tonight
From sleep by the Christmas bells and light:
Ring sweetly, chimes! Soft, soft, my rhymes!
Their beds are under the snow.

Noel! Noel!
Carols each Christmas bell.
What are the wraiths of mist
That gather anear the window-pane
Where the winter frost all day has lain?
They are soulless elves, who fain would peer
Within, and laugh at our Christmas cheer:
Ring fleetly, chimes! Swift, swift, my rhymes!
They are made of the mocking mist.

Noel! Noel!
Cease, cease, each Christmas bell!
Under the holly bough,
Where the happy children throng and shout,
What shadow seems to flit about?
Is it the mother, then, who died
Ere the greens were sere last Christmas-tide?
Hush, falling chimes! Cease, cease, my rhymes!
The guests are gathered now.



Bethlehem Town



Eugene Field

AS I was going to Bethlehem-town,
Upon the earth I cast me down
All underneath a little tree
That whispered in this wise to me:
"Oh, I shall stand on Calvary
And bear what burthen saveth thee!"

As up I fared to Bethlehem-town,
I met a shepherd coming down,
And thus he quoth: "A wondrous sight
Hath spread before mine eyes this night,
An angel host most fair to see,
That sung full sweetly of a tree
That shall uplift on Calvary
What burthen saveth you and me!"

And as I gat to Bethlehem-town,

Lo! wise men came that bore a crown.
"Is there," cried I, "in Bethlehem
A King shall wear this diadem?"
"Good sooth," they quoth, "and it is He
That shall be lifted on the tree
And freely shed on Calvary
What blood redeemeth us and thee!"

Unto a Child in Bethlehem-town
The wise men came and brought the crown;
And while the infant smiling slept,
Upon their knees they fell and wept;
But, with her babe upon her knee,
Naught recked that Mother of the tree,
That should uplift on Calvary
What burthen saveth all and me.

Again I walk in Bethlehem-town
And think on Him that wears the crown.
I may not kiss His feet again,
Nor worship Him as I did then;
My King hath died upon the tree,
And hath outpoured on Calvary
What blood redeemeth you and me!

Who Santy-Claus Wuz

JES' a little bit o' feller—I remember still—
Ust to almost cry fer Christmas, like a youngster will.
Fourth o' July's nothing to it!—New Year's ain't a smell!
Easter-Sunday—Circus-day—jes' all dead in the shell!
Lawzy, though! at night, you know, to set around an' hear
The old folks work the story off about the sledge an' deer,
An' "Santy" skootin' round the roof, all wrapt in fur an' fuzz—
Long afore

I knowed who "Santy-Claus" wuz!

Ust to wait, an' set up late, a week er two ahead;
Couldn't hardly keep awake, ner wouldn't go to bed:
Kittle stewin' on the fire, an' mother settin' here
Darnin' socks, an' rockin' in the skreeky rockin'-cheer;
Pap gap', an' wonder where it wuz the money went,
An' quarl with his frosted heels, an' spill his liniment;
An' me a-dreamin' sleigh-bells when the clock 'ud whir an' buzz,
Long afore

I knowed who "Santy-Claus" wuz!

Size the fire-place up, an' figger how "Ole Santy" could
Manage to come down the chimbley, like they said he would:
Wisht 'at I could hide an' see him—wunderd what he'd say
Ef he ketch'd a feller layin' fer him thataway!
But I bet on him, an' liked him, same as ef he had
Turned to pat me on the back an' say, "Look here, my lad,
Here's my pack,—jes' he'p yourse'f, like all good boys does!"
Long afore

I knowed who "Santy-Claus" wuz!

Wisht that yarn was true about him, as it 'peared to be—
Truth made out o' lies like that-un's good enough fer me!
Wisht I still wuz so confidin' I could jes' go wild
Over hangin' up my stockin', like the little child
Climbin' in my lap tonight, an' beggin' me to tell
Bout them reinders, and "Ole Santy" that she loves so well
I'm half sorry fer this little-girls-sweetheart of his—
Long afore

She knows who "Santy-Claus" is!



James Whitcomb Riley

