

A NINETEENTH-CENTURY CHRISTMAS CAROL

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*Before the paling of the stars,
Before the winter morn,
Before the earliest cockcrow,
Jesus Christ was born:*

*Born in a stable,
Cradled in a manger,
In the world His hands had made,
Born a stranger.*

*Priest and king lay fast asleep
In Jerusalem;
Young and old lay fast asleep
In crowded Bethlehem.*

*Saint and angel, ox and ass,
Kept a watch together,
Before the Christmas daybreak
In the wintry weather.*

*Jesus on His mother's breast
In the stable cold,
Spotless Lamb of God was He,
Shepherd of the fold.*

*Let us kneel with Mary Maid,
With Joseph bent and hoary,
With Saint and Angel, ox and ass,
To hail the King of Glory.*

This tender and devout Christmas carol was written by Christina Georgina Rossetti, a Protestant poetess of the nineteenth century. It might be of interest to refresh our memories with some of the outstanding facts of Miss Rossetti's unusual life. She was born in England on December 5, 1830. As a child she enjoyed the advantages

and disadvantages of the strange society of Italian exiles and English eccentrics which her father gathered about him. In her early years she possessed a grave, religious beauty of feature, and sat for such noteworthy artists as Holman Hunt, Madox Brown and Millais.

After the death of her father, she lived in poverty, ill health, and singular quietness. Throughout her life she was a strong high-church Anglican. Twice she was sought in marriage, but each time, from religious scruples, she refused her suitor. Miss Rossetti suffered more or less constantly throughout her life from physical ailments. Her last days were spent in utter, almost uninterrupted retirement. She died in 1894.

She is outstanding in the purity and stolidity of her splendid lyrics and most arresting in the glow and music with which she robes her unusual moods of melancholy reverie. Her works contain a unique mixture of austerity with a refined sweetness and sanctity of tone, plus her amazing sensuousness of color. Surely, in her best pieces, Christina Rossetti may challenge comparison with the most outstanding of our poets. The most original feature of her work has been rightly indicated as her union of determined religious faith with her undeniable grasp upon physical beauty.

Her spirit was cloistered, timid, nun-like. Weighed down by true humility and almost endless suffering, her character became so utterly retiring as to be almost invisible. Miss Rossetti is very often referred to as an Anglican nun, due no doubt to her secluded, tender, religious spirit.

It is singularly surprising to find this Protestant lady with such a tender devotion to our Blessed Mother. What a refreshing discovery to meet with this high-church Anglican poetess portraying so delicately, yet tensely, the Incarnation and especially the vital part that Mary played in the sequence of events.

Let us soar high and look down upon the scene of the birth of Christ as it unfolds itself step by step and show that Miss Rossetti's carol fits into the succeeding episodes, stanza for stanza. The quiet slopes and hills of Bethlehem lie peaceful and still in the deepening shadows of a December night. Bustle and confusion is rampant in the little town. Mary and Joseph, fatigued and wayworn, anxiously seek hospitality from its churlish inhabitants. Joseph searches in vain. In charity he begs the shelter of some poor house wherein the King of Glory and the Monarch of the Universe might be born. Yet, every convenience is refused and every door is shut against them.

The lovely face of Mary is now pale and drawn. She has journeyed for four weary days across the mountains from Nazareth, ex-

posed to frost, cold, wind, and rain. Joseph is anxious. Where shall he find shelter for his young wife. He is forced to lead her out of the town and enter a poor cave, a gloomy excavation in the rocks. The time is now midnight—

*Before the paling of the stars
Before the winter morn,
Before the earliest cockcrow,
Jesus Christ was born.*

The Blessed Virgin kneels in prayer. Saint Joseph endeavors to make the wretched cavern more habitable. He closes the entrance to the cave in order to keep out the chilly night air and arranges a crude bed on which Mary may rest. Suddenly a most brilliant light illumines the shelter. The Child Jesus is born—

*Born in a stable,
Cradled in a manger,
In the world His hands had made,
Born a stranger.*

The king and priest are warmly sleeping in their ornate beds. A temporal king lies sleeping in royal luxury while the King of Kings, the Lord of all, lies helpless in a lowly manger. All His children whom He had come to save were soundly at rest in their well-sheltered houses in the crowded town. Yes—

*Priest and King lay fast asleep
In Jerusalem;
Young and old lay fast asleep
In crowded Bethlehem.*

Joseph finds the cave already tenanted by an ox and an ass, which turn their large, meek eyes wonderingly upon the new-comers. Truly the highest and lowest are present at His coming. As He is come to redeem all, it is most fitting that Saints and Angels and animals be present. What a singular and unique example of detachment. What a model for poverty of spirit which He is heralding as the happiest state of life. He is clearly proving to us that detachment of heart from worldly wealth and glory gives ultimately much greater contentment even in this life than any inordinate pursuit of earthly things. How fitting it was that—

*Saint and angel, ox and ass,
Kept a watch together,
Before the Christmas daybreak
In the wintry weather.*

Most kind St. Joseph, may we enter and contemplate the holy scene. Bathed in a soft radiance, a little Babe is lying upon the ground at Mary's side. He trembles with cold. Weeping He stretches forth His tiny arms towards His mother, as if begging to be taken to her bosom. Mary, her gentle face lit up with joy and worshipful adoration, lifts Jesus from the ground, presses Him to her heart and strives to warm Him with kisses—

*Jesus on His mother's breast
In the stable cold,
Spotless Lamb of God was He,
Shepherd of the fold.*

We draw nearer and kneel at Mary's feet. Adoring our infant God, we resolve to take Him as a model of all our actions. If we would focus our eyes on the face of the Christ child, allow ourselves to be enveloped in the sense of His presence and wholeheartedly accept His values, we would know a thorough joy that could not be eradicated or ever assailed by the most gruelling miseries of human life. In the contemplation of Jesus in the cave, taught by the eloquent silence of the King of Glory, we would learn that all the earth can give is but nothing and that the life of God with God contains all. Yes—

*Let us kneel with Mary Maid,
With Joseph bent and hoary,
With Saint and Angel, ox and ass,
To hail the King of Glory.*

Truly, if we leave the cave with these few thoughts and resolutions, the Divine Infancy will hold a significance for us. The crib of Bethlehem will then become a school instead of a mere Christmas carol. A school which we should attend often to listen to so great a Master. A Master, Who alone can make us truly learned in that knowledge which is supremely necessary for our eternal salvation.