

'Twas THE NIGHT BEFORE CHRISTMAS

ARNOLD MORRISON, O.P.



T is Christmas Eve. A pure white mantle, covering the ground that so stubbornly retained its green coat until a few hours ago, twinkles like myriads of tiny diamonds, as here and there arc lights challenge its crystal sheen. The night is beautifully crisp and calm. Large, lazy, flakes of snow drift into the faces and cling to the garments of happy travelers. Nature strives to extend her best and most symbolic welcome to the King of all kings.—But not the children who feed upon her bounty! They are too modern, too enlightened, to be taken in by an ancient superstition. For them the Christian holyday is become a Roman holiday. Although it nears the sacred hour of twelve, vast throngs are out pleasure seeking. Things are different now; times have changed.

Ah how often have we heard this cry of the moderns, "Times have changed—the catch phrase that is supposed to cover a multitude of sins and relegate the Church and religion to the decadent past. Upon no other proof, religion is dubbed a superstition, immorality is accepted as natural, and even the existence of God is called a disputed fact. If Christ were alive today would He admit this: that times have so changed as to render useless and foolish the faith of the Apostles? That a glorious birth which so affected a world over nineteen hundred years ago, is in this age unable to win anything more than a hidden notice in the newspapers? Has society altered to this amazing degree?

It was growing dusk and becoming a little chilly as the weary couple slowly approached the town that had been their objective throughout the day. The year was about four A. D. The man, not yet past the prime of life, led a small donkey upon which sat a young girl. Both man and maid were spent from the arduous travel over the rugged country which surrounds Bethlehem. An unbelievable amount of activity greeted them as they entered the usually dull town. A decree of the Emperor that all must be enrolled, had brought together many friends and relatives who claimed Bethlehem as the city of their House. The narrow streets were crowded with merry people

anticipating the pleasant hours to come. Certainly the newcomers were out of place in this bustling throng. Their clothing and sparse equipment was poor and shabby in comparison with the magnificent equipages which passed them by. The man, Joseph, seemed bewildered by the crowds. His wife, for the girl Mary was married to him, did not appear to notice but sat as if in meditation, a slight smile upon her lips.

At last the inn was reached, and Joseph sighed with relief. A knock—the innkeeper answered and examined his prospective fare. No great profit here, he thought. What was that—the wife was about to become a mother? Only an added reason why his well-paying guests should not be disturbed. A harsh laugh—the door banged, shutting out the sounds of merriment within. Joseph turned away, a pained expression in his eyes. The reception was the same all over the town. Even their former acquaintances were too occupied by the excitement of the moment to pay heed to anyone in need. Joseph, with Mary who bore the God-man within her, came to a stable.

Back to our enlightened moderns; is the picture so much different? The same excited crowds are seeking pleasure. True, their clothing is not the same; they ride in costly cars instead of on richly adorned beasts; they eat a different fare in a different manner, and demand a different type of amusement. But stripped of all these accidentals, they are still the same selfish, cold, pleasure-seeking lot that had no time for their God when He came to them on that first Christmas night. What an opportunity the innkeeper missed!—the opportunity to play host to the Holy Family in person, the precious chance of holding in his arms the new-born Christ! But are not the Indifferentists of 1936 even greater fools? They can receive Jesus for their own, carry Him away with them, become one with Him. Here indeed is a change from the past, an added miracle the Jews never dreamed of and would not believe when Christ indicated it. But our moderns pass on, ignorant of all this, smug in the belief that they are vastly different from the ancient Jew, despite the fact that they must always carry with them the same human nature with its weaknesses and vices, the same needs, material and spiritual.

The pendulum swings again. Forced by a need that could no longer be denied, a now worried Joseph turned to the stable as a last resort. With unspoken apology and infinite tenderness, he helped Mary to her resting place for the night. While other men provided their wives and mistresses with the best that the land could produce, Joseph, in anguish, had worse than nothing to give to one whom future ages would venerate as the Queen of all the Saints. No one to

help, none to care; was every man occupied with the world and self? No, not quite all, for a pitiful minority were hurrying, despite many obstacles, to welcome the King of kings. The Three Wise Men, with a devotion worthy of the saints, were following the star which they believed would lead them to the Christ. Rich in this world's goods, certainly, as they passed along, they must have been invited to stop and enjoy themselves. As they entered new towns, the beauty of new sights must have arrested their gaze. Surely there was the usual collection of open bazaars with their colorful paraphernalia. They must have been told that instead of foolishly following a star in order to adore a babe, they should have remained in their own lands, enjoying luxuries and the services of others. What if the whole adventure proved to be a fancy of their own superstitious minds? Yet they persisted—and found God.

Ah! how like our own day on this beautiful Christmas eve! The minority of faithful believers hear the sound of the bells and rise up to follow it. Leaving pleasures and comforts to others, they seek the new born Babe. As they set out, many of their friends try to deter them. "Midnight Mass? Bosh! Rank superstition! Don't waste your time. Come on, there's a dandy Christmas party going to be held at so and so's." The same world, the same temptations, the same arguments, even the same accusations that the Wise Men encountered as they journeyed towards Bethlehem! Likewise a variety of attractions seek to divert the modern 'wise man': the magic of the night, gaiety and laughter, warm lights streaming from enchanting portals, display windows filled with every kind of device calculated to delight the senses.

Out of all the peoples alive at that time, only three men came to adore their God, and these were not of the chosen race. Surely God had given His people abundant notice of this great event. Even the chief priests were able to tell Herod that Christ would be born in Bethlehem of Juda, as foretold by the prophets. We condemn their hard-heartedness; yet, much more should be condemned the people of today! The Jews had a prophecy, but we, its fulfillment. They had a promise to be; we, a living fact. They refused to receive the Christ who had yet to assert His divinity; we have that same Christ, true God and true man, yet we remain indifferent. Or is it that human nature has changed? Is it that the Saviour and God of the Jews cannot also be the Saviour and God of enlightened twentieth century Gentiles? At any event, the followers are still the few, while the multitudes dine and dance as of old.

There remains one more notable event of that blessed night so

long ago. ". . . there were in the same country shepherds watching, and keeping the night watches over their flocks." Poor unfortunates were these, denied the material joys and comforts of city-dwellers, ignorant also of their Saviour's birth. Though they did not reject their Master, yet they were not ready to receive Him. Ignorant, occupied with worldly cares, these individuals were willing but weak. They needed the help which God was quick to provide—" . . . behold, an angel of the Lord stood by them." What a condescension, an angel sent to serve man! That all might know the Word, the very forces of heaven itself are used. And the shepherds, simple but trusting souls, believed the words of the angel. They went and like the Wise Men, they also found—God!

Is not the same thing being repeated today? Thousands of poor souls, sinners, perhaps, but nevertheless men of good heart, have lost sight of their Lord through weakness. Others, a bit too ready to listen to the world, are trying to serve both God and Mammon. Still others, though bound by the darkness of idolatry and ignorance, are ready to embrace the feet of their Saviour if they can but find Him. Truly a vast horde which marches under the old standard of a willing spirit in weak flesh! In His mercy God sends to them messengers as He did to the shepherds,—not angels this time, but men and women dedicated to His service: priests to administer to His flock and keep it on the right path; sisters to instruct the children; zealous religious to lead back the wayward to the crib and a new start; missionaries to carry the gospel of the Saviour's birth to pagan lands. Again and again is repeated the angel's cry, "Behold, I bring you good tidings: this day is born to you a Saviour." It is a call that will never grow old, that will never go unanswered, that will never lose its efficacy. For as long as man peoples this earth, he will act in accordance with his human nature. Each age will have its virtues, its vices; its rich and its poor; its good and its bad, possibly with new variations but always basically the same. And every age shall find the remedy for its ills the same as that prescribed by the Apostles: a remedy that began with the first Christmas and ended on the Cross.

We have finished our walk through the snowy night; we climb the church steps. The snow still falls in large, beautiful flakes as sweet music announces the joyful hour of twelve. Another Christmas is here! Again that glad, glad cry reëchoes throughout the world, "Glory to God in the highest; and on earth peace to men of good will." The noise and excitement of the city grows dim as the priest begins Mass. Was not this drama first acted twenty centuries ago? The same pleasure-mad people are without; the same group within,

composed of the faithful ones who are always present, and of others not so faithful, but summoned now by Christ and eager to begin again. The celebrant at the altar pronounces the sacred words of Consecration, and the Most Pure Babe is ready to be taken into our hearts. He deals more intimately with us than He did with the Wise Men and the shepherds!

Yes, it is the same—the same Christmas. The world will go on, always having its worldlings who scoff at religion. Ever and ever shall we hear old objections in new garments. This must be. But side by side with the foolish, will be found the wise.

BENEDICTION, CHRISTMAS DAY

SEBASTIAN CARLSON, O.P.

Now the Host
Is raised on high;
In the Monstrance
God is nigh!

See not there
A wafer white,
But an Infant
Lapped in Light.

Mary holds
Him in her hands;
Magi kiss His
Swaddling bands.

Come, adore
Creation's boast!
See the Child,
Forget the host.