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CHRIST'S MASS

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May the offering of this day's festival be pleasing to Thee, O Lord, we beseech Thee; that by Thy grace we may, through this sacred intercourse, be found like unto Him in whom our nature is united unto Thee: Who liveth and reigneth with Thee in the unity of the Holy Ghost, world without end. Amen. (Secret of the First Mass.)

The snow had become a brownish-gray slush and the people going to mid-night Mass crunched and splashed it underfoot as they threaded their way along the crowded sidewalk. They passed by the gaily-decorated taverns filled to capacity with Christians celebrating the birth of Christ. They streamed under the theatre marquee, the lights of which proclaimed a gala show to herald the new-born Saviour. On they trudged past shops and mansions to the great stone edifice that would this night become a stable. Inside the Church, the priest bowed reverently to the crucifix in the sacristy and, meditating as he went, walked slowly into the sanctuary and genuflected before the altar. His appearance brought the congregation to its feet and eager, shining faces became attentive as the Holy Sacrifice began. After the prayers at the foot of the altar, the priest ascended to the epistle corner and read the Introit of the Mass: "Why have the Gentiles raged and the people devised vain things?"

In imperial Rome, an emperor, who was called the divine Augustus, rested from his license and thought of his empire. He considered himself to be god. The people built statues to their gods but of what use were they? These statues didn't command fleets and armies. They couldn't say: "Live," and a man would live; nor: "Die," and a man would die. No, he was the people's god because he owned

them body and soul. So he decided to get a tally on his creatures. He gave orders that a census of the whole world should be taken; and, as he was god, it was done. Now, in those days, the whole world, or rather civilization, was really the Roman empire which consisted of a small portion of lower Europe and the Near East. Contained therein was a pocket-sized country called Judea, only recently subjugated by Roman arms. Thither, the royal or divine decree was proclaimed and in the tiny hamlet of Nazareth, Mary and Joseph made preparations to go to their designated registration place which was another little town called Bethlehem. And so was the ancient prophecy fulfilled. Micheas had foretold that from Bethlehem would come the Messiah and there Mary was going, to bring forth her Child who was Jesus. What irony! A sated emperor, to flatter his delusions of being god of the world, sets the time and place for God to come into the world. "Why have the Gentiles raged and the people devised vain things?" No doubt, as they were leaving, Mary and Joseph prayed together that God would bless their journey. Perhaps they recited that verse of the second psalm which is said in the Introit of the mid-night Mass: "The Lord said to me: Thou art my Son, this day have I begotten Thee."

THE GLORIA

The celebrant turns from the epistle side of the altar and stands directly before the tabernacle. The Greek invocation of *Kyrie eleison* has died out and now, through the muffled silence, the priest raises his voice in the familiar paean of praise: *Gloria in excelsis Deo*. Triumphantly and confidently, the choir replies: *et in terra pax hominibus bonae voluntatis*. With living faith, the congregation echoes the sonorous phrases in their hearts. "Glory to God in the highest." Let glory be to Him, not only for His gifts and blessings but also for His trials and chastisements. They think of the power of Him who made the earth out of nothing; they reflect on the magnitude of His only-begotten Son, who this night is to be born. They sing that He alone is holy and He alone is the Lord. But, if the sublimity of so powerful a God, moves them to awe and fear, the glad cry of "peace to men," sets them at ease and fills their hearts with joy and gratitude to this Prince of Peace.

Out on the hills of Judea, it is a cold and clear night. The wind moans around the scraggy cedars and jagged rock formations. A pale moon wanly lights the desolate scene. As their flocks lie motionless at rest, a group of silent shepherds hug their fires. They are an unkempt

lot. Their tattered robes and unwashed bodies mark them as strangers to social concourse. It is a rugged life in the hills and the unceasing fight against the elements and scavengers is hardly conducive to cultured living. Yet, they are wise with a wisdom few attain, the wisdom of Divine Providence and God's all-pervading presence in the world. What else can a shepherd think about in his lonely vigils? What else recurs again and again to his mind, surrounded, as he is, by the vastness of land and sky, confronted, as he is, by the mystery of life? Neither the uproar of the market-place nor the softness of the salon hinders his way to contemplation. Thus they sat, silent and introspective, with their thoughts of God and His promises made of old. Then, into their meditation, broke a great wonder. The night became brighter than day and strange sounds filled the air. Being men, they cowed in terror at the preternatural but, being wise, they heeded the voice that bade them fear not. They listened in wonder to the awesome presence which told them of a great event. At Bethlehem then on the edge of the desert, the Messiah has been born; they will find Him in a manger. Then the sky was covered with a multitude like unto this shining presence and sweet music filled their ears. These men, for whom the Muses did not exist, were the audience of a choir that was truly out of this world. Never would the memory of that heavenly song leave their minds. "Glory to God in the highest: and on earth peace to men of good will."

THE EPISTLE

When the last echoes of the Gloria have been muted in the great vaulted roof, the priest reads a Lesson from the prophet Isaias, describing the Child who is born to us and the Son who is given to us. Immediately afterwards, follows the Epistle. Tonight, the people hear a section of St. Paul's inspired letter to Titus. "Dearly beloved"; the great Apostle is addressing not only his disciple and co-laborer but also all the faithful through the centuries who gather in Churches to hear the Word of the Holy Spirit. "The grace of God hath appeared to all men." Tonight, He will be born again. "Denying ungodliness and worldly desires, we should live soberly and justly and godly in this world." In the taverns, nearby, the juke-boxes sound forth Bing Crosby crooning: "Oh, come all ye faithful;" through the miasma of tobacco, beer and cheap perfume, the gentle words: "Oh, come let us adore Him" impinge on the uncomprehending ears of semi-inebriates. On the stage of a theatre, a svelte singer of flaming ballads acknowledges the holy night by moaning her dreams of a white Christmas.

The priest reads on: "Looking for the blessed hope and coming of the great God and our Saviour Jesus Christ."

In the rear of the Church, a shabby and weather-beaten man kneels. He has spent the joyous eve plodding through the streets to tenement after tenement, looking for rooms. The upkeep of a family of seven was too much to enable him to pay the required raise in rent. Out he must go, and soon, because the landlord has a prospective tenant waiting for the apartment. The man's heart is filled with despair. The words, "No rooms, sorry," beat again and again in his tired brain. A slow, dull anger burns in his breast on remembering the several times he was refused because "we don't allow children." His crushing misery tore a sobbing prayer from his heart: "Oh Christ, come and help me; come and help me." As an echo to his plea, came the words of St. Paul: "Who gave Himself for us . . . that He might cleanse to Himself a people acceptable, a pursuer of good works."

It is a long and tiresome journey from Nazareth to Bethlehem and the jolting, bony back of a donkey is an awkward conveyance. Yet, Mary did not seem to mind, for she smiled her thanks to Joseph when he tried to make her more comfortable. But Joseph was worried. He knew that her time was rapidly approaching. Ominous fears passed through his mind. Suppose the length of the trip and the movements of the donkey should hasten the birth. What could he do? Where could he go for help? He wiped his brow and tried to push away these dire forebodings. Mary noticed his forlorn expression; with a touch of her hand and a gentle smile, she assured him that all would be well. The stars came out and a chill wind blew on their backs. Now they could see the watch fires of Bethlehem, twinkling in the distance. Joseph sighed his relief and spurred on the donkey. When the village was reached, Joseph eagerly scanned the faces of the passers-by, hoping to recognize a relative or friend who might take them to shelter. He peered in vain because there was none there who would know the poor carpenter from Nazareth. Finally, Joseph had a lad point out the local inn. There he led the donkey and knocked on the door. Inside, the sounds of merriment brought bright promise of food, warmth and shelter. How Mary needed them after the long ride in her precarious condition! A rough voice at his elbow called a halt to Joseph's musings and gave words to his desires. A room was wanted and food and. . . . "Sorry, we're all filled up." Joseph's fears rose sharply. "But my wife!! It is her time." The inn-keeper now noticed Mary sitting quietly on the patient beast. She had heard none of the conversation, saw nothing of her surroundings. Her thoughts were wholly fixed on the small movements of divine life in her womb.

The host of the inn became aware of her condition. She looked so young and tender in the soft moonlight that he was of half a mind to make room for them. But then he remembered the commotion of a childbirth. He recalled the pitiful moanings and screamings, the confusion of attendants and equipment, the emotional unrest of all. No, it was quite impossible. There were too many people here, having a good time in their family reunions. No end of complaints would ensue. Joseph waited an eternity for the decision and then heard only a mumbled: "Sorry." A flame of anger flared within him as he looked at the shamed face and averted eyes. Then, once more, cold despair settled on his shoulders and he turned wearily away. The innkeeper salved his conscience with a helpless shrug of his shoulders and returned to the cheer and warmth of the inn. "He came unto His own and His own received Him not."

THE GOSPEL

The drowsy little altar boy has moved the missal and the congregation stands in rustling waves to hear the Christmas story. Over the radio, tonight, Loretta Young will repeat to her breathless young audience the tale of "The Littlest Angel." Lionel Barrymore will thrill adults with his dramatization of Scrooge in the "Christmas Carol." But despite their attractiveness, these stories fall immeasurably short of the simple narration of the Syrian physician we venerate as St. Luke. It is infinitely better, of course, because St. Luke had, as his co-author, the Holy Spirit. But even from a human and literary standpoint, tonight's gospel is an incomparable work of drama. There is no audience for whom it is not appropriate. Its appeal is to a child's heart; yet its depth defies the profound theologian. Its simple, homely language encompasses concepts never to be exhausted by meditation. And so, throughout the great Church, the simple and the wise, the laborer and the professor stand in rapt attention as the story of the Nativity is told once more. They are born on the wings of faith from Rome to Nazareth to Bethlehem. They mingle with the good and the bad because they walk with Mary and Joseph and listen to Caesar and the inn-keeper. They experience the supernatural in the presence of God and feel the human in the person of the shepherds. Joy and fear replace each other in their breasts; faith and hope give birth to charity in their hearts. All creation has a role to play. When God is born angels proclaim the good news; men are present in their goodness and selfishness; animals are represented by the flocks of sheep; on a bed of straw, in a cave of rock, the God-man slumbers. Each one of the

faithful projects himself into the scene. The man who has been hunting for rooms is one with Joseph as he is turned away from the inn. The young wife who, for the first time, senses the throb of another life under her heart, thinks of Mary who carries her divine burden. All the people are with the shepherds who come in faith and are rewarded with love.

Mary was very happy. The sweet, indescribable peace of God permeated her soul even as His ineffable Child filled her womb. But as she gazed on her spouse who, with bowed head, led the way, a feeling of compassion took hold of her. Her heart went out to him whom she loved so sincerely and she thanked God that He called Joseph to be her husband and the Child's foster father. She recalled the surprised hurt in Joseph's eyes when he had first noticed she was with child. She had trusted in God who had begun the work to bring it to fulfillment. She had been confident that Joseph would not betray her. And yet, it must have been hard for him to accept what he could not understand. She remembered the night he had come to their house and told Joachim that he would now take his espoused wife to his own home. Silently she had gathered her few belongings and gone out with him. Love and devotion had glowed in his honest face as he told her of the angel who had explained the mystery and instructed him in his position. Now, Mary knew, he reproached himself for his failure to find decent lodgings when in truth it was Providence that so ordained it.

Nearby were caves, honeycombed in the rocks on the edge of the desert, which served as stables for the animals of travelers. To these Joseph turned for refuge. After selecting the largest and most sheltered, he sadly informed Mary that here they had best spend the night. Joseph employed all his energy and skill to transform the dank cavern into a more habitable dwelling. While he worked, Mary raised his spirits by recounting again the wondrous happenings of the last nine months. She was to repeat that story many times to her Son's disciples, one of whom, St. Luke, would record it for posterity. As she talked, her gentle hands unfolded, smoothed and refolded the tiny garments on which she had devoted such loving care. She felt the thrill of the divine life stirring within her body as a bright star slowly descended from the heavens.

THE CONSECRATION

The midnight Mass comes to its climax. The organ's booming crescendo and choir's resonant chant fade away with the words:

"Blessed is He that cometh in the name of the Lord. Hosanna in the highest." The tinkle of a bell cuts through the roaring silence. The attention of all is riveted on the celebrant as he bows low over the altar and breathes the deathless words over the host. He genuflects and all heads bow; he raises the Host and Christ is before their eyes; he genuflects again and all bow in silent adoration. The wine is consecrated and all behold the Blood whereby their sins are forgiven. The greatest miracle has been worked again. Through eyes of faith, the congregation sees a wonder far beyond the lame walking, the blind seeing and the dead waking. Talk not to them of substance and accidents, subsistence and essence. They know that what was bread is now Christ, the Son of God. Theirs is the absolute certitude that this Host, although it looks like bread and tastes like bread, is nevertheless the Body of their Lord and Saviour. "Blessed are they that have not seen and have believed."

All Bethlehem sleeps. The wind has ceased to rustle the trees and the hardy night birds have stopped their crying. Across the entrance to the cave, the weary Joseph has lain down in deep repose. In the far corner, on a bed of straw lies the sleepless Maid of Judea. We imagine the celestial court of heaven itself to be, for the moment, hushed in silence as from the House of Gold and Tower of Ivory is ushered forth the Infant Jesus. Further our imagination cannot go. The inscrutable mystery of the Nativity confronts us so that we may only stand and adore. A virgin she was before His conception and a virgin she remains after His birth. The laws of nature are overcome by the Author of nature's laws. But why wonder and marvel? Now is the time for love, not learning. Without doubt, only a mother can appreciate the love that Mary felt as she held her Child to her breast. The joy that rises above space and time was hers as she tenderly wrapped Him in His swaddling bands. This rapture escapes our narrow souls, but all may love in their own measure. All may rise with Joseph at the Infant's first plaintive wails. All may stand trembling in His tiny presence and worship. For this is truly God whom the Mother Mary now gently places in the box of straw that is a manger. Now, salvation has begun and the awesome climax of Christmas has been reached. "This day have I begotten Thee."

ITE MISSA EST

Christmas has now spanned the centuries and merged with that first holy night in Bethlehem. The Eucharistic Christ and the Babe in the manger are the same Lord whom the faithful and the shepherds

have received in their hearts. As the latter left the stable, so do the people step out into the night, rejoicing that their redemption is at hand. A falling snow has already covered the grimy streets with its soft blanket of white. Along the avenue, the tavern's din has subsided and the lights of the theatre have been extinguished. The Peace of Christ has its quiet hour.

"Grant, we beseech Thee, O Lord our God, that we who rejoice to commemorate by these mysteries the birth of our Lord Jesus Christ, may by godly lives, deserve to attain unto fellowship with Him: Who liveth and reigneth with Thee in the unity of the Holy Spirit world without end. Amen." (Postcommunion of the first Mass)