

CHRISTMAS CAROLS AND CHRISTMAS WORSHIP

EFFIE M. ROSS

*The Earth has grown old with its burden of care,
But at Christmas it always is young;
The heart of the jewel burns lustrous and fair,
And its soul, full of music, breaks forth on the air
When the song of the angels is sung.*

*It is coming, old Earth, it is coming to-night!
On the snow-flakes which cover the sod
The feet of the Christ-Child fall gentle and white,
And the voice of the Christ-Child tells out with delight
That mankind are the children of God.*

PHILLIPS BROOKS

FROM the fourth century to the present day the glad season of Christmastide has been kept in divers manners by people of all nationalities. The superstitions which surround it are many and widespread. In Languedoc if the eve be serene and cloudless this is taken as a good promise for next harvest, while in Newfoundland it has long been the custom to make the weather forecast for the coming year from the twelve days of the Yuletide season. The day is also thought a lucky one all over Christendom; people exchange good wishes with one another in accordance with the belief mentioned in "The Golden Legend" that any wish formed then by a person of righteous life and clean lips is granted by the Almighty.

The fête day is often ushered in with a heavy discharge of musketry and with merry chimes of bells. Tennyson refers to the charm of hearing in the wolds of his own county—Lincolnshire—"the merry merry bells of Yule", while

The Christmas bells from hill to hill
Answer each other in the mist.

From the chimes that announce the glad festival we come to the carols that hymn its praise, and that may be traced back through the ages to the scene of our Lord's nativity, for

His place of birth a solemn angel tells
To simple shepherds keeping watch by night;
They gladly thither haste, and by a choir
Of squadron'd angels hear his carol sung.

Before passing from the first Christmas carol, the *Gloria in Excelsis*, to a short history of these ancient madrigals, reference must be made to the words of an old hymn said to have been composed by St. Ambrose and formerly used in the Salisbury Cathedral service, which embodies the old idea that the cock crows all night long on Christmas night and by its vigilance dispels every kind of malignant influence:

The cock that is the trumpet of the morn
Doth with his lofty and shrill-sounding throat
Awake the god of day, and at his warning
Whether in sea or fire, in earth or air
The extravagant and erring spirit hies to his confine.

Washington Irving in his account of *Christmas in England* refers to the same old legend, quoting the lines from *Hamlet*:

Some say that ever 'gainst that season comes
Wherein our Saviour's birth is celebrated
This bird of dawning singeth all night long;
And then, they say, no spirit dares stir abroad;
The nights are wholesome—there no planets strike,
No fairy takes, no witch hath power to charm,
So hallow'd and so gracious is the time.

The habit of carol-singing by the village waits on Christmas Eve still lingers in the more primitive parts of England, and a recent revival of many old customs has tended to bring these venerable hymns into greater notice. We have had revealed to us a vast collection of curious old literature, whose dates we often have to determine by such small points as peculiarities of spelling. The word "carol" has been variously derived. It is traced by some to "Karole", an old English word for a ring or circle, but a more likely source is in the word "choro", thence "chorollo"—a little chorus—for all genuine carols have a chorus of one or two lines prefixed to them. In France these Christmas hymns are called "noels", the word being probably derived from "nova", thence "nouvelles" or "news", which gave to us the old English form of the word "nowells" and to the Romance countries "nouvé". The use of "noel" to mean the glad tidings of good-will to men is seen in one of the oldest carols extant:

I come from Hevin to tell
 The best nouvelles that ever befell;
 To you these tidings true I bring
 And I will of them say and sing....

There are many old and curious collections of carols both in England and in France, one of the rarest being found at Oxford and consisting of a series of MSS compiled by one Richard Hill, servant to an alderman Whynger, Lord Mayor of London in 1505. Other venerable collections are Wright's and Sandys's, while the French noels have been carefully treasured by M. la Monnaye and père Michel Saboly, a priest of Avignon.

As far back as the Middle Ages we find traces of carol-singing in the ballads of the Bards and Troubadours. Warton in his *History of English Poetry* notices a license granted in the year 1562 to John Tysdale "for printing certayne Goodly Carowles to be sunge to the Glorie of God." The fact that these were written partly in Latin, partly in the vulgar tongue, leads to the conclusion that they were composed by "clerks", or persons conversant with the ritual and phraseology of the Roman Church. The chorus, or "chorollo", is usually in Latin, as is often the last line of each verse. Take this example from Hill's MSS:

Alleluia! Alleluia!
 Deo patria, sit gloria.
 Ther up a blossom sprung of a thorn
 To save man-kynd that was forlorne,
 As the Profittis sayd beforene.

Deo patria, sit gloria.
 Ther shon a star out of hevyn bryght
 That this was Jhesus fulle of myght,
 That men of earth should deme aryght,
 Deo patria, sit gloria.

Of much the same style is the "noel nouveau" taken from a rare French tract of the sixteenth century and to be sung *sur l'air de "dites-nous Marie!"*

Célébrons la naissance
 Nostri Salvatoris
 Qui fait la complaisance
 Dei sui Patris.

Cet enfant tout aimable
 In nocte media
 Est né dans une étable
 De casta Maria.

Another interesting carol, sung to a strange old chant in the province of Burgundy, is the following, also written in alternate lines of French and Latin:

Voici le Roi des Nations
Natus ex sacra Virgine:
Ce fils de bénédiction
Ortus de David seminae

Voici l'Etoile de Jacob
Quam praedixerat Balaam
Ce Dieu qui detruisit Jéricho
In clara terra Chanaam

A second class of carols embodies the stories of the Gospels relating to Christ's birth and youth. They may be called historical carols, and include those hymns still sung in the west of England, such as (1) *When God at first created man*, (2) *On Christmas Day in the Morning*, (3) *When Jesus Christ was twelve years old*, (4) *Augustus Caesar having brought the world to quiet peace*, (5) *A virgin most pure as Prophets do tell*. One may mention similar carols specially written for the commemoration of the festivals of the Innocents', St. John the Baptist's, and St. Stephen's Days, the Feast of Epiphany etc., which are all comprised in the Yuletide celebrations.

Next come the carols founded on the many legends which have come down to us through the ages, passed on from bard to troubadour and minstrel as they journeyed through the different countries of Europe, till finally the songs first sung in castle banquet-halls became the popular melodies of the people;

Joseph was an old man, and an old man was he
When he wedded Mary, the Maid of Galilee;

The tradition of the cherry-tree being made to bend and yield its fruit to the Virgin Mother is equally well known along the sunny slopes of the south, although in Spain the date-palm replaces the hardier tree of northern climes. Another interesting carol of this type is a thirteenth century hymn for St. Stephen's Day, telling how "St. Stephen was a clerk i Kyg Heronde halle", and the more popular one:

King Wencelaus looked out
On the Feast of St. Stephen,
When the stars were shining bright
And the snow lay even....

This hymn goes on to record a miracle, and the alms-deeds wrought on St. Stephen's Eve by the good patron saint of Bohemia.

On Christmas Eve in many of the country places of England may still be heard the village waits singing their rustic ballads before the windows of their richer neighbours in the hope of extracting largesse; but the still older custom of the "mummers", or singers in disguise, is unfortunately dying out even in the smallest hamlets. Wordsworth tells us how

The minstrels played their Christmas tune
To-night beneath my cottage eaves;

He was probably even then listening to such simple melodies as

God bless you, merry gentlemen,
Let nothing you dismay,
For remember Christ our Saviour
Was born on Christmas Day.

Another old English carol has its counterpart in Upper Italy, where along the shores of the blue Mediterranean the soft and musical voices of the peasants are heard to sing

"Dormi, dormi, O bel Bambin
Rè divin
Dormi, dormi, O fantolin
Ta la nanna, O caro giglio
Rè de ciel."

The names of very many writers of old carols are now lost in oblivion, but most of the French noels were written during the seventeenth century by Michel Saboly, whose memory is still cherished in his native Avignon. Born in 1614 of gentle blood, he was educated as a boy in the Jesuit College of Carpentras, and thus early removed from the peasantry of his native district. But his innate religious feeling, combined with the lively and sensitive imagination common to all the Provençals, enabled him to transpose into the *nouve* the love and piety evinced in the humble huts of the people. He wrote in their own musical dialect, once the language of kings and troubadours. To the Romance peasants Christmas is what they themselves call it, "the Mother of Nights",—or, as the Anglo-Saxons named the season, "Modranecht" (Mother's Night), as if each of the twelve days of the Yuletide was the mother of a month of the coming year. The verses of the good old poet-priest are still their favourite *chansons*.

On entering the Church Saboly served for twenty-five years as prior of Sainte Madeleine of Carpentras, and was then removed to the Collegiate-Church of St. Peter in Avignon, receiving at the same time the degree of Bachelor of Arts from the university.

At St. Peter's the gifted priest was appointed "Maestro di Capello", and was thus enabled to devote his time to playing on the great organ and composing melodies worthy of the beautiful Christmas hymns till his death and burial in the church he had loved so well by the banks of "the swift and arrowy Rhone." Saboly's *nowe*, or noels, might be called *pastorales*. So long did their popularity last in Avignon that a new edition was published about 1865, still retaining however the original dialect which is one of the softest and purest of all the *patois* of southern France. The following example may be quoted from the *pastorales* of this "troubadour of Bethlehem", as he has been fondly called. In it we hear the shepherds asking leave of their employers to seek the infant Saviour:—

Translation:

(Lou Pastre)

Es fort bien veritable
Que lou pichet innocent
Es na dins un étable
Qui es auprès de Betelem.

(The Shepherd)

It is very really true
That the little innocent
Is born in a stable
Which is near Bethlehem.

(Son Mestre)

Que lou Fieu de Dieu sie nas,
Per lou creire
Lou fan veire
Jeu pòde pas me l'imagina".

(The Master)

That the Son of God is born
To believe it
One must see it
I cannot fancy it.

After some more altercation both master and servants depart on the joyful errand. One of Saboly's happiest efforts along other lines is his *Carihoun* or *Carillon*,—"A Song of the Christmas Bells", of which the translation is:-

Up! bells! awake,
The day appears, the dawn is breaking.
Behold the happy morn!
Let all arise and meet it.
God comes, and at His coming
Ring the first rounds!
Make the great bell ring—
Din, don! din, dan!
God makes Himself a child
To save the race of man,
Din, don! din, dan!
Avaunt, Satan!
No more of war
Since all is new!
Glory in heaven
And peace upon the earth!

This apostrophe to the joyous bells of Christmas reminds one of the glad peals which announce the solemn Midnight Mass of the Roman Catholic Church, perhaps the most impressive service in her Ritual. The scene revealed as the huge candles are lighted one by one on the High Altar of a great church like the Madeleine or the Cathedral of Notre Dame in Paris—casting a blaze of illumination over the vast throng of kneeling worshippers—is most striking in its grandeur. On the stroke of twelve the finest singers in the city take up the glorious solo of Adam's *Cantique de Noel*, the most popular Christmas carol in all France to-day, and the solemn words beginning

Minuit, chretien, c'est l'heure solennelle
Où l'homme Dieu descendit jusque' à nous.

are followed by a full chorus of trained voices in the grand strains of

Peuple, à genoux, attends ta délivrance,
Noël, Noël, voici le Rédempteur
Noël, Noël, voici le Rédempteur.

Unfortunately the popular English translation

O holy Night! the stars are brightly shining;
It is the night of our dear Saviour's birth!

has completely marred the beautiful blending of the original words to Adam's exquisite music, so that the harmonious effect and charm of the song are quite lost unless rendered in the melodious French language.

Probably the most imposing Christmas observances in Christendom are those held in the little village of Bethlehem nestling among the leaden hills of Palestine—where the Saviour of the world was born—and those that take place in the Eternal City, where not only interested tourists but many Italian peasants congregate each year to celebrate the greatest event in the records of mankind.

The Church of the Nativity in Bethlehem, belonging in common to the Latin, Greek, and Armenian Christians, has a stately convent for each sect adjoining it. Rising like some baronial castle, it is probably the oldest monument of Christian architecture in the world. It was erected by Saint Helena in 327 A. D. over the grotto or cave in the limestone rock that is said to be the birthplace of Christ. The forty columns, which support the decaying roof of this once splendid Basilica, are believed to have been originally in the Temple at Jerusalem. Their Greek and Byzantine frescoes of saints and madonnas, combined with the faded mural mosaics and the cedar roof, testify to the former glory of this historic edifice.

At ten o'clock on Christmas Eve the adjoining Franciscan Church is filled with a motley crowd of men, women, and children seated on the floor, their red fezes and white veils set in bold relief by the darker background of visitors gathered from many lands to witness the Pontifical Mass which begins the elaborate ceremonies of the Roman Church. The grand strains of the *Te Deum* rise from the great organ as an accompaniment to the rich melodious chanting of priests and monks who enter in solemn procession followed by bishops and archbishops in gorgeous robes heavily embroidered with gold and silver.

Towards midnight the music grows gradually softer till silence reigns over the congregation, when suddenly a curtain above the chancel arch is drawn aside and a miniature cradle appears containing an image of "the Babe of Bethlehem". Simultaneously with the lowering of the cradle the strains of *Gloria in Excelsis* burst forth from the organ and choir. The Bambino is reverently raised before the adoring worshippers who prostrate themselves in oriental devotion. The image is then replaced in the cradle and carried in the arms of the Patriarch—who comes specially from Jerusalem for the ritual—at the head of a long procession which now sets out for the Cave of the Nativity. The symbolic Cross is followed by all the high dignitaries of the Church in magnificent vestments and by the consuls from Jerusalem in their official garb accompanied by glittering "cavasses" carrying gilded staves. Then come rows of chanting priests and monks, and lastly all the congregation, each one bearing a lighted taper.

On reaching the Grotto of the Nativity—converted from a subterranean vault into a chapel about forty feet long and ten feet wide—the Patriarch hands the image to a deacon and begins to intone the Gospel of St. Luke: "And it came to pass in those days that there went out a decree from Caesar Augustus" At the verse ending "the days were accomplished that she should be delivered" he takes back the effigy and, laying it upon the silver star set in the marble floor to mark the supposed spot of the Nativity, repeats the inscription engraved upon it: *Hic de Virgine Maria Jesus Christus natus est*. After drawing fine lace-work over the image the Patriarch continues, "And here wrapped Him in swaddling clothes", and last of all devoutly places the little silver manger upon the altar with the words "and here laid Him in a manger because there was no room for them in the inn." There the emblem remains during Christmas week, carefully shielded from irreverent hands by an interlaced screen.

The marble walls of this interesting "Chapel of the Manger" are hung with rich draperies, and over the marble manger marking the cradle in which Christ was laid is an altar decorated with gold and silver ornaments which gleam in the soft radiance shed by the thirty-two pendant lamps that burn continually. The Greek and Armenian Christmas services are also held here, but at later dates. They are remarkable for their great length and for the magnificence of their gorgeously clad priests and choristers.

Another interesting Christmas service is that held in the historic Church of the Franciscans at Rome—the "Ara Coeli"—where hundreds of Roman children congregate to do honour to the Babe of Bethlehem. The ceremony is known as "The Blessing of the Bambino", and here may be seen the scions of princely houses side by side with children of the *contadini*—or peasantry—tendering gifts to the new-born King.

This image, known as the *Santissimo Bambino*, has an interesting history dating from 1615, when—according to the legend—there lived in Jerusalem a humble Franciscan monk who occupied his leisure in carving wooden statues. One day he secured some wood from the old olive trees which were then to be found near the grotto "Dell' Agonia" and which, tradition says, were testimonies of the Saviour's agony. The pious recluse prayed fervently as he carved an infant Christ out of this wood, but as it possessed no colour on completion he was dissatisfied with its unlikelike appearance. After continual fasting and prayer, however, to his great surprise one morning he found his statue tinted with the hues of life. The miracle, being soon heralded through Jerusalem, caused the image to be worshipped for many years in the Holy City. When later the *religieux* was called to Rome by his superiors, he took with him the Bambino,—which was lost in a shipwreck near Leghorn, but fortunately soon recovered by diving—and hurried to Rome to place his treasure in the Church of "Ara Coeli" where it has since remained.

From Christmas Day to Epiphany the statue is exposed in an artistically made "Presipio" or manger, which takes up the space of an entire chapel at the west end of the nave. On a platform erected around one of the antique columns opposite the statue, from four to five on the afternoon of Christmas Day, children between the ages of six and twelve years recite the stories of the Nativity and Redemption. They recite in sermons or dialogues, with every kind of pretty gesticulation, and this performance enacted daily for a week at the same hour draws thousands of spectators. During the afternoon of Epiphany "Il Bambino" is carried in procession

about the church, and after benediction has been pronounced from the top of the grand stair-case it is deposited in a chapel attached to it for the rest of the year.

Another curious custom at this church during the Christmas season is the striking and novel scene on the long flight of one hundred and twenty-four steps originally brought from the Quirinal as a votive offering to the Madonna of Ara Coeli after the deliverance of Rome from the Black Death. The steps are thronged with merchants selling all sorts of quaint little coloured prints of the Madonna and Child, miniature bags, pewter medallions and crosses stamped with the same figures to be worn around the neck, framed pictures of Saints and of religious subjects belonging to the season, tiny wax dolls and sheep covered with cotton wool, books of legends and prayers, rosaries, chestnuts, oranges,—all of which are eagerly purchased by children and by the *contadini*.

Nowhere, however, is this solemn Midnight Mass more impressively observed than in the church of Santa Maria Maggiore on the Esquiline at Rome and which is said to contain the "Presipio" or very manger on which the infant Jesus was laid. This hallowed shrine is visited for worship by great throngs of the faithful, for one of the characteristics of the service of the Roman Church during the Christmas season is the special honour shown to the Virgin Mother. In former years another ceremony was much in vogue, the "Novena of the Zampagnari" or shepherds of Calabria who in all the splendour of their national costumes came down from their mountain homes to wander through the streets of Rome from morn till eve, singing their quaint hymns and canticles to the accompaniment of primitive flutes and strident bag-pipes. When the nine days pilgrimage was ended, they assumed the rôle of the shepherds of Bethlehem, playing their weird melodies before the sacred "Presipio" in Santa Maria Maggiore.

To this interesting custom of these simple Italian peasants the whole world is indebted for the exquisite strains of the "Pastoral Symphony" in *The Messiah*. It was while spending Christmas at Rome that Handel heard the Calabrian shepherds celebrating the birth of Christ after their immemorial usage, and the music of their "pifferari" or pipes he later introduced with marvellous effect into his world-famous oratorio.

In recent years it has become the custom in nearly all the English-speaking churches of Christendom to celebrate the gladsome Fête of the Nativity with such carols as the *Adeste Fideles*—handed down from the Latin of the eighteenth century—and the more recent *While Shepherds watched their flocks by night*, or Phillips Brooks's

O Little Town of Bethlehem. Happily in not a few rural districts of England

“The singing waits, a merry throng
At early morn, with simple skill
Yet imitate the angels’ song
And chant their Christmas ditty still.”
Noel! Noel! Noel!”

RELATIVITY

W. E. MACLELLAN

Is man a chimera inane,
A phantasm fantastic of night?
And is he the sole creator
Of that which he thinks of as light?

What knows he of darkness or light,
Except by the sense of his eyes?
Before him did either exist,
Will either survive if he dies?

Apart from his thoughts, knows he aught;
Aught is there, indeed, to be known?
Is matter an empty conceit;
Is he, in a void, all alone?

Is space a mere concept of mind,
And time but a figment of dreams?
Are motion and force unreal;
Is nothing of all what it seems?

Do the nerves which react on his brain
Only vain simulacra impose?
He is certain they do not deceive.
He is conscious. He knows that he knows.

And his sureness of knowledge begets
Faith in wisdom above and beyond.
To a universe, ordered and true,
All his thoughts and his feelings respond.