

CHRISTMAS WITH THE POETS

By EFFIE MAY ROSS

THE glorious Festival of the Nativity has afforded rich opportunities to poets – both past and present – to depict the beauties which its sacred teaching and associations suggest. Such versifiers as Crashaw, Southwell, Herrick, George Wither, Ben Jonson, Gay, Charles Wesley, Tennyson, Scott, and Wordsworth with many others, have bequeathed us, not only a veritable treasury of Christmas poesy, but varied allusions to the mode of its observance in bygone days, as well as the peculiar beliefs connected with the fête.

Among the best known is Milton's 'Ode and Hymn on the Nativity': –

"It was the winter wild
While the heaven-born Child,
All meanly-wrapt, in the rude manger lies."

Again in the twelfth book of his 'Paradise Lost' we find a graphic account of the first Christmas Night: –

"His place of birth a solemn Angel tells
To simple Shepherds, keeping watch by night;
They gladly thither haste, and by a Quire
Of squadron'd Angels, hear His Carol sung."

Inspired by this first Christmas Carol – 'The Gloria in Excelsis' – George Herbert wrote: –

"The shepherds sing, and shall I silent be?
My God, no hymn for Thee?
My soul's a shepherd too, a flock it feeds –
Of thoughts, and words and deeds.
The pasture is Thy word, the streams Thy grace,
Enriching all the place.
Shepherd and flock shall sing, and all my powers
Out-sing the daylight hours."

Christina Rossetti thus sings of the Nativity: –

"Love came down at Christmas
Love all lovely, love divine;
Love was born at Christmas,
Star and angels gave the sign.
Love shall be our token,
Love be yours and love be mine;
Love to God and all men,
Love for gift and plea and sign."

Nowhere was Christmas more gaily spent than in old England, where

"The mistletoe hung in the Castle hall,

The holly branch shone on the old oak wall.”
 for, according to Susan Coleridge,
 “We ring the bells and we raise the strain,
 We hang up garlands everywhere
 And bid the tapers twinkle fair,
 And feast and frolic – and then we go
 Back to the same old lives again.”

Tennyson says

“The Christmas bells from hill to hill
 Answer each other in the mist.”
 and their joyful peals have ever been a prominent part in its
 celebration, being thus commemorated by George Lansing
 Taylor: –

“Hark! the Christmas bells are ringing,
 All abroad, their echoes flinging,
 Wider still and wider winging,
 On the waste of wintry air.
 Rapture, rapture, through the nations,
 On their solemn, swift vibrations
 Rapture, rapture, through the nations,
 Rapture, till their glad pulsations
 Million blissful bosoms charm.”

The same idea is embodied in this verse by Keyes Booker: –

“Come on, sweet bells, till round the world,
 The message shall be borne.
 And men of every clime shall know
 The peace of Christmas morn.”

The mediaeval idea that an ox and an ass were present in the
 sacred manger is set forth in a 16th century poem called “San-
 nazaro”; and has been depicted, not only in very old prints but
 by quite modern artists. How the story, that as each Christmas
 came round these animals knelt in their stalls in adoration be-
 fore midnight to commemorate the Nativity, touched Thomas
 Hardy, is shown in his lines, entitled ‘The Oxen’: –

“ ‘Christmas Eve, and twelve of the clock,
 “Now they are on their knees,
 An elder said as we sat in a flock
 By the embers in hearthside ease.
 We pictured the meek, mild creatures where
 They dwelt in their strawy pen,
 Nor did it occur to one of us there
 To doubt they were kneeling then.
 So fair a fancy few believe
 In these years! Yet, I feel,

If some one said on Christmas Eve
 'Come, see the oxen kneel.
 "In the lonely barton by yonder coomb
 Our childhood used to know,'
 I should go with him in the gloom,
 Hoping it might be so."

Even in the New World this legend has been found for Howison, in his "Sketches of Upper Canada" relates how he met an Indian at midnight, on Christmas Eve, during a beautiful moonlight, cautiously creeping along and beckoning him in silence, saying at the same time, "We watch to see the deer kneel; this is Christmas night, and all the deer fall upon their knees to the Great Spirit, and look up." Tradition has long represented the cock as crowing all night long on Christmas Eve, dispelling by its vigilance every kind of malignant influence; and which is thus vividly described by Shakespeare: -

"Some say, that ever 'gainst that season comes
 Wherein our Saviour's birth is celebrated,
 The bird of dawning singeth all night long:
 And then, they say, no spirit dare stir abroad;
 The nights are wholesome; then no planets strike,
 No fairy taken, nor witch hath power to charm,
 So hallow'd and so gracious is the time."

With these powerful lines may be compared the words of an ancient hymn, said to have been composed by St. Ambrose, and formerly used in the Salisbury Cathedral service: -

"The cock, that is the trumpet to 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 confines."
 Nor are these the only members of the animal creation whose natural instinct has, it is said, taught them to do honour to the Nativity; for at Aberavon, in Monmouthshire, England, there formerly existed a superstition that every Christmas morning, and then only, a large salmon disported in the adjoining river, and permitted himself to be handled or taken up, although it would have been regarded as the height of impiety to capture it. At any rate, we know that in bygone days, salmon was a very favorite relish at this festival, as Carew relates how,

"Lastly, the sammon, king of fish,
 Fils with good cheare the Christmas dish."

One of our own Canadian poets, the late R. Stanley Weir of Montreal, thus describes the scene in the manger at Bethlehem

on Christmas morn in "D'ou Viens-tu Bergere?" or

"Le Noel d'Aoste": -

"Shepherdess, whence comest thou,
O, whence comest now?"

"From the ox and ass's stall,
Where a wonder did befall,
And I heard their voices cry
Praise to God on high."

"Shepherdess, what didst thou see
Of that mystery?"

"In the stable there I saw,
Lying on the heap'd up straw,
Sheltered from the windy street,
Babe new-born and sweet."

"Nothing more, O Shepherdess,
Was there nothing more?"

"Mary's hair was soft as silk;
She gave her little Child of milk.
Poor Saint Joseph in the fold
Trembled with the cold."

"Nothing more, O Shepherdess,
Was there nothing more?"

"Quiet ass and oxen there,
Gently breathing, warm'd the air,
Gently breathing, warm'd the Child,
That all sweetly smil'd."

"Nothing more, O Shepherdess?

Prithee, still confess.

I saw little angels three,
Come down from the sky to see,
Three small angels, chanting clear,
O, 'twas joy to hear."

That remembrance of the Nativity brings healing for the weary heart as well as wonder is finely portrayed by George Macdonald: -

"They all were looking for a King
To slay their foes and lift them high,
Thou cam'st a little baby thing
That made a woman cry.

"O Son of Man, to right my lot,
Naught but Thy presence can avail:
Yet on the road Thy wheels are not,

Nor on the sea Thy sail.
 My how and when Thou wilt not heed
 But come down Thine own secret stair,
 That Thou may'st answer all my need -
 Yes, every bygone prayer."

The angelic chorus over the hills of Bethlehem, the arresting report of the shepherds, the sweet babe in the cattle stall, the star and the visit of the Magi, all form part of the Advent Festival and make men feel the nearness of God, who sent His great gift of love to the world.

" 'Love awakened jubilant. 'Lo! now,' quoth he
 " 'Has come again the time that sets me free
 Too oft, too long, in human hearts I lie
 Passive and pent, while humdrum days go by,
 Now, scarce a heart will hold me prisoner,
 For Christmas calls, "Rise, Love, and be astir
 Come forth, dear Love, now is the Christmas-tide?"
 And ever at that call hearts open wide?" "