

CHRISTMAS IN MODERN BETHLEHEM

By Evangeline Ben-Ottel.

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ABOUT nineteen hundred and two years ago, in the reign of Caesar Augustus, the little town of Bethlehem, six miles south of Jerusalem, was crowded with visitors at about this time of the year, all coming to be taxed in their native country. In a cave below the principal inn or khan of the town, where the oxen were usually kept, a gentle Jewish maid bent lovingly over her Babe. A light from heaven illumined the rude manger where He peacefully lay and shed a brilliant radiance over the scene.

Several hundred years later the pious Empress Helena, of Rome, visited Palestine and discovered this grotto in Bethlehem, which had served as a humble shelter of the Christ Child. She was convinced that this was the very place which had been hallowed by the nativity, and thereupon wished to mark the spot for all time. She had a magnificent church built over the site, so that Christians from generation to generation might worship there. The remains of that beautiful building are still to be seen in the city of Bethlehem.

It is a strange fact that, though Bethlehem was pre-eminently a city belonging to the Jews in the days of David and of Ruth, not one Jew is to be found among its inhabitants today, and the dwellers can in no way claim to be descended from that race, though some travelers think they see a resemblance in their appearance to the Jewish type. The town which saw the birth of Christ is inhabited almost entirely by Christians. They are a thrifty and industrious people and superior in every way to the other village dwellers round about Jerusalem.

On Christmas eve the square is filled with people dressed in their gayest attire and adorned with all the finery in the way of necklaces, bracelets and coins they possess. Christians from every part of the country gather here on this night—Latins, Greeks, Armenians and Copts.

The Church of the Nativity is the oldest in Christendom. It belongs to these three sects, each of which has a separate chapel within its own services. The large basilica, which is the only remains of the church built by St. Helena, is owned by them all in common. It has a long double line of Corinthian pillars, similar to those which are found in the Mosque of Omar on the site of the ancient temple in Jerusalem. The faded mosaic on the wall and the rough ceiling of beams from the cedars of Lebanon are the only treasures remaining in this edifice, which was once blazing with gold and silver. This ancient building adjoins the one now in use and is only divided from it by a small door.

Here are the usual alters and images which are found in the Latin church all over the orient, and in the Greek portion are the curious pictures which the Greek revere in the place of images. A spiral staircase of fourteen steps leads from this church down to the holy crypt, a grotto twenty feet under the great choir.

This holy crypt forms the chapel of the manger and is a subterranean vault excavated out of the limestone rock of which the hill of Bethlehem is composed. On its walls are old silken tapestries. Many of the silver lamps hanging here were donations from kings, and are always kept alight. This is the supposed site of the birth of our Lord. There is a bright star on the marble floor, commemorating the appearance of the "star in the east," with this significant inscription encircling it:

HIC DE VIRGINE MARIA JESUS
CHRISTUS NATUS EST.

Above the altar twelve lamps are hanging, to represent the twelve apostles. Three steps more lead down to another chapel over the alleged stall in which, according to Latin tradition, the wooden manger was discovered.

On Christmas eve the pilgrims crowd around the church awaiting the hour of opening in order to get good seats to witness the grand ceremony. Every man, woman and child who can possibly come is present. The nave being devoid of any seats, the people sit or kneel on the marble floor, making a curious mass of red fezzes and white veils. In silent prayer they await the hour of the service. Meanwhile the strains of the Te Deum softly rise from the great organ.

Presently a procession of bishops and archbishops, attired in their most gorgeous robes, enters the church chanting. They are followed by priests and monks and small boys dressed in scarlet, who constitute the choir. The handsomest church decorations are kept for this yearly service.

The deep, well trained voices of the choir join in singing beautiful anthems, after which there is a great deal of chanting without much variation. Several times during the service the bishops, one after another, absent themselves to reappear in different attire, each of the robes being, if possible, more gorgeous than the last.

At midnight there is a sudden lull in the music and bells in the distance ring the midnight chime. Then, as by magic, a certain is drawn aside and over the chancel gates a cradle appears to the wondering gaze of the worshippers and within the cradle an image of the babe The Gloria in Excelsis is sung and the bells continue to peal merrily, announcing to all Bethlehem that it is Christmas day. The "bambino" or image of the babe is now lifted before the eyes of the worshippers, who prostrate themselves on the ground in adoration. The procession of bishops, priests and monks and the pilgrims, decends toward the grotto of the manger chanting and waving incense all around it. The chapel being so small only the officiating priests beaded into the grotto and the pilgrims gather about the narrow archway and steps descending into the manger. They now, with much pomp, amid the chanting of the priests and the waving of the incense, lay the little waxen image in the chapel of the manger, where it remains during Christmas week for devout worshippers to visit. Such is the ceremony held by the Latins on Christmas eve.

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THE GIRL AT THE CAR WINDOW

By Lullie Wells Smith.

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THE train this Christmas eve slowed up enough to take a single passenger aboard and to allow a girl seated at one of the car windows a better view of the snow covered landscape and the little patchwork of houses about the station. Then it lumbered off again. The new passenger took a seat beside the girl at the window because it was the only vacant one. She continued to gaze at the white fields for a time.

"Merry Christmas! What a mockery!" she thought bitterly. Then she stole a glance at her new companion. His face was hidden by the newspaper he was holding close to his eyes in a vain struggle to read by the fast fading light. When he threw it down in disgust, she leaned forward and asked timidly:

"May I look at it a moment? I want to see if there is any later news about the Pochunk bank robbery."

He handed her the paper and watched her curiously as she bent over it and with eagerness read the first page.

"Did you find out what you wanted to know?" he asked when she handed the paper back to him.

"No, for there is no trace of the thieves or the money yet!" she answered, with a great deal of feeling.

"Did you have any money in the bank?" he asked after a pause.

"Every cent that I own in the world!" she answered, lifting her handkerchief to her eyes and bursting into tears.

"I am sorry." The man spoke with an embarrassment that seemed out of harmony with his rough features. She wiped her eyes and with a little attempt at bravery said:

"Oh, I know I ought not to do this—and of course you do not understand. When the doctors ordered pay-out here he put \$2,000 in that bank, and after he died—it was all I had. Now it is gone, and I, oh, I am so helpless! And here it is Christmas time." She wept afresh, and the man moved uneasily in his seat, lifted his paper and turned the leaves nervously.

In a few minutes she dried her eyes and leaned wearily against the back of her seat. She had not slept for two nights, and soon her eyes closed unconsciously, and she sank heavily against the straight uncomfortable side of the car. With a sudden lurch of the train she swayed to the right, then back again, and finally fell in a little unconscious heap upon the strong shoulder of her companion. He looked helplessly, hesitatingly, at her a moment, then, quietly moving in his seat, slipped off his coat, made it into a heap and left it beneath her head. The light from above faintly outlined her delicately shaped face against the black coat, her small white hand was thrown in child-like trustfulness above the glistening masses of golden hair.

Bending quickly over the sleeping girl he fumbled a few seconds with the coat under her head, then drew back and pulling his hat over his eyes peered from under the wide brim into the darkness outside. Several shrill whistles came from under the car window, a lantern flashed up and there was a muttered oath. As the car moved off he ran wildly down the aisle.

The noise of the engine increased and the girl opened her eyes. She looked up into the face of the man standing over her and started. Could he be the same? Was she dreaming? Surely her seatmate did not wear a mustache, yet these seemed to be the same piercing black eyes, the same broad shoulders.

She stared stupidly and thought the mustache must be a vagary. Then her eyes fell on the coat under her head and she faltered:

"Thank you so much for putting it there. I hope you haven't come to your station."

The man smiled knowingly. "Yes, miss, he has passed his station, but for some reason he left his coat behind. You see, miss, it's very funny. I happen to be the detective in this Pochunk bank case—I reckon you have heard about it—and have been on the track of the leader of that gang since daybreak this morning. Somehow I thought he boarded this train, and when I got on at G—I looked all through for him, but being in company with a lady I didn't size him up till it was too late. I was just coming in from the other car when I saw him dash down the aisle and make a jump while the car was moving, and of course by the time I got to the door the car had gained too much speed for me to jump after him, so I reckon he has given us the slip for good."

The girl sat staring up in the face of her new companion without opening her lips. At last she burst into a hysterical fit of laughing. Suddenly checking herself she lifted the coat and uttered a loud exclamation as a little package dropped out of the folds. Slipping off the cover she picked up a roll of bills, and panned carefully to one of them was a scrap of paper upon which some words had been hastily written with a lead pencil:

Please accept as a Christmas present my share in the Pochunk bank raid, which I think will about cover your loss. I used to read Sunday school books once and in them I remember the thief was always brought to bay by a soft, gentle little woman. That is my case. Thank you for making me do the first decent thing in my life.

The detective gave a long drawn out whistle when he read the note.

"He is a bad fellow, but he might be worse!" he commented with a crestfallen sort of smile. "Don't you feel a little proud of the way you handled the most notorious outlaw in the state?"

But the girl did not trust herself to answer. She had turned her face to the window and in the little prayer of thanksgiving she recut out across the wide, wild darkness for her recovered fortune there was a plea for the man who had given it back to her.

The man who offered a prize for the woman who would write him the best love letter failed to make the most of his opportunities. He would have had more fun if he had offered to give the prize to the girl who proved herself most proficient in the matter of making love to him personally.