

# The True Witness

AND CATHOLIC CHRONICLE.

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J. K. FORAN, Lit. D., LL.B., Editor

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All business communications to be addressed to C. A. McDONNELL, Managing Director THE TRUE WITNESS P. & P. Co.



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## CHRISTMAS GREETING.

"A Merry Christmas to all our readers and friends and many happy returns of the season." Sometimes this greeting is heard with indifference, when it is merely for custom sake that it is spoken; more often is it the expression of the true sentiments of the heart, and it then always awakens a responsive echo in the bosom of one to whom it is addressed. Although we have not the pleasure and advantage of a personal acquaintance with each and all of our many readers, still we feel as though we were linked to every particular subscriber and friend of the TRUE WITNESS by a bond that grows stronger as the weeks roll past. Every Wednesday we send forth our twelve columns of editorials and through them we hold converse with several thousands upon every imaginable kind of subject. In penning these articles we actually spend twelve full hours and sometimes more, each week, in most intimate communion of spirit with our readers, and they, in perusing these columns, converse with us; thus mind speaks to mind, soul looks into soul, heart pulses to the throbs of the corresponding heart, and the writer and his readers are united in the closest of all unions—the union of thought.

For these reasons do we speak from the inmost recesses of our nature, when we wish each and every one of our readers a truly merry, a really happy, a sincerely prosperous and a most holy Christmas; and in expressing this wish we feel confident that it is reciprocated from all the thousands who, though in one sense, are strangers to us, in another and grander sense are well-wishers and friends. May the aged enjoy many another Christmas time to "husband out life's taper" in peace and holy contentment, for truly is it sung that

"Age will come on with its winter,  
Though happiness hideth its snows;  
And if youth has its duty of labor,  
The birthright of age is repose."

May the young be happy and may the blessings of this holy time come to them in countless throngs, for along the road of their earthly pilgrimage they will need the choicest graces from above to battle with the spirits of evil that shall hover around them. May the number of your friends increase and may the Angel of Death spare those we have tonight, that when the next Christmas comes it may find us all as happy and as strong as we are this year. May the One whose lowly yet glorious birth we celebrate on the 25th of December, with His Holy Mother and His Foster Father, direct our mind, enlighten our understanding, and guide our pen, that the continuation of the bond of union be-

tween us and our readers may be for their benefit, spiritual and temporal, and, therefore, for the greater glory of His Holy Spouse the Church.

## CHRISTMAS SONGS.

That Christmas is a joyous festival is apparent in the fact that it has always been ushered in by song and music. The birth of the Saviour is surely the most glorious event that the centuries have ever beheld, and its commemoration is naturally the grandest of festivals. On that chill December night, when, in the Judean hamlet, the Son of God appeared upon earth, His arrival was heralded by the songs of the Angelic choirs. Of that scene we speak in our Christmas greeting, so it would be superfluous to now dwell upon its harmonies and grandeur. But it is remarkable that, throughout the ages that have since elapsed, the grandest, most touching, most soul-stirring songs, or hymns, are those that have the birth of Christ for their theme.

In the world of poetry, as in that of sacred music, the brightest talents have been employed in the celebration of that mighty event. Of all the hymns that awaken our souls to adoration, perhaps none surpasses the "Adeste Fideles." The moment its powerful and inspiring notes awaken the echoes of the temple, it would seem as if a real Christmas atmosphere were stirred into existence. In this Province, more particularly, there are a number of other Christmas hymns so familiar that their very melody breathes the festival to which they belong. For example, "Il est né le Divine Enfant," "Les Anges sur nos Montagnes," and others with which all our Catholic people are acquainted. But, apart from the canticles and hymns, we cannot but perceive how the great poets of Christianity have loved to commemorate, in verse, the joyous occasion of that happy birth.

Milton, whose sublime genius scaled the heights of Epic poetry and astounded the world with the majesty of his "Paradise Lost," was as great, if not greater, in the beautiful Christmas hymn which he penned in most perfect verse. And from Milton to the humblest poet that has ever attempted to woo the Muses, all seem to have been charmed with the subject and to have touched the harp, in different keys, as they sang the advent of the King of Peace.

At this season of the year the old love to sit by the fireside and to gather the young around them, in order to recall, in legend, tale and poem, their own youth while delighting the children of the present. Scott opens his Christmas picture with such a scene:

"Fling on more wood, the wind is chill,  
But let it whistle as it will,  
We'll keep our Merry Christmas still."

If, during the present season of festivity, any of our readers would like to enjoy their Christmas evenings after the olden style, we would advise them to collect the children and to tell them stories of the years long gone. And of all the poems that we would most recommend, is that "Christmas Carol" of the Poet Priest, Father Abram J. Ryan. Therein is something so peculiarly touching that the simple and the sublime seem to blend, as the shades of a rainbow, into each other. It is a lesson and a sermon, couched in the sweetest of verse, and not above the reach of any fine intellect—young or old.

We remember well, thirty odd years ago, receiving from our godmother a little Christmas story; it was simple and touching; each Christmas night, for several years, it was a portion of the household's programme to read us that story. So lasting is the memory of it, so deep the

impression it made upon a childish mind, that even now we feel that Christmas should be celebrated in the same way, otherwise there is something wanting. Whosoever wrote that little story never imagined that it could ever afford so much pure happiness to any child of humanity. The persons who write Christmas stories or poems—of the real, heart-touching type—are perhaps not aware that they are conferring untold benefits on humanity; but such is the case.

In this age of progress, when men suppose that they are building up for the future, in reality they are tearing down palaces of enjoyment in which the souls of a past generation revelled. Beside the electric battery, the steam engine, the tubular bridge, the wonderful inventions of the age, it seems to us that the simple Christmas songs that fall from the poets of the season. Let us resolve to keep alive those treasured melodies and transmit them as a glorious heritage to the future; for what would Christmas be without song, music and story.

## THE BIRTH OF CHRIST.

This is the Christmas story *par excellence*; it is old, but ever new; let us tell it again in our own simple way.

It was a chilly night in early winter; December was drawing to a close, but the spectre of the north had passed over the land and left a mantle of white to enwrap the shoulders and heads of the mountains. The pale moon hung low upon the western horizon, and millions of stars twinkled in the cold, blue depths of the orient sky; the wind from beyond the Jordan was bitter and biting; it came from the deserts and it gathered strength as it paused amidst the recesses of Judean mountains. The sheep were huddled together on the hillsides; down in the valleys the shepherds crowded around the feeble balze of their fagot fires; the watch-dogs slumbered fitfully and half-awakened by the cold, they barked in their disturbed dreams. Over in the City of David—called Bethlehem—strange scenes were being enacted. Hundreds had come up from all ends of the land to respond to the call of the Roman governor; the houses of the town were all occupied; men from the confines of Egypt, men from far-off Galilee, men from the "Eye of the East,"—Damascus—men and women from all quarters, in all their variety of costume and accent, filled the streets of the crowded city. Outside the walls was a khan, or stopping place; therein a few of the later arrivals found refuge. And in a grotto, within that khan, where an ox and an ass were eking out a supper of straw, a couple from Nazareth had found shelter. Not one of the thousands sleeping in that city knew of their presence; no one cared whether these poor travelers were housed or not; no one was aware of the wonderful things that were then and there taking place. Oblivious of the fact that the prophesies of four thousand years were being accomplished, the crowd slept on, and not a breath of warning came to the sleepers to tell of the greatest event that had occurred since the day of Creative miracle.

The moon sank below the hills of the west; the milky way still cast its arch across the dome of the sky; the stars twinkled joyously in their silent realm. The hour was midnight; the moment predicted throughout the ages had arrived. The crystal portals of heaven were drawn back, and the advance guard of the celestial army, all glittering in the splendor of God's eternal livery, with harps of gold in their hands and crowns of glory on their heads, stepped out into unmeasured space. Down through the stillness of the night came the first soft

notes of an undying canticle and the sound fell like the peaceful voice of God's sweetest singer upon the slumbering ears of the shepherds. As if aroused by some mysterious presence from their sleep, the half-startled, half-astonished flock-tenders arose and gazed about them. High up in the zenith they beheld a curtain of quivering light, like the fringes of the Aurora Borealis, sweeping downward to the hilltops; and faintly came the unison of harp and voice, both magical and mysterious in their effects. Nearer and nearer came the scintillating splendors, louder and louder came the songs of the advancing vision. The sheep shivered, with awe, and rushed together into a ravine, where they sought shelter from a danger they could not understand; the watch-dogs were mute with fear and they crouched behind the awakening shepherds.

All this time the throng slept on in the City of David; the wind blew its chill blast across the turbulent Jordan; and the world was wrapped in darkness, for it knew not the approaching redemption. At last the whole vault of heaven was filled with myriads of celestial beings; their wings of light flashed glories upon the scene, and the splendor of their sheen fell brightly upon the white turrets and gray battlements of ancient Bethlehem. Brighter grew the light; nearer came the angels; louder swelled the chorus. Down, down, descended the vast, the countless throng of God's pure spirits, until, over the khan, they collected in one impenetrable mass of indescribable glory. Loud rang the harps on the winter air, and louder and sweeter swelled the voices of the choir; the shepherds listened; the wind ceased to blow from beyond the Jordan; all nature seemed hushed in mute adoration; but from the walls of the city to the distant declivities over by Jerusalem, and even beyond the sacred city, the refrain was wafted. "Gloria, in excelsis Deo," sang the angels; "Gloria,..... Deo!" replied the echoes that slumber around the lake of Tiberias; "Et in terra, pax hominibus boni voluntatis," responded the angelic singers; "Pax,..... hominibus," answered voices from beyond the Valley of Giants.

The miracle of ages had been performed; the humble shepherds knelt at the Crib, and amidst the display of celestial rejoicing, they adored the Christ-child, the Saviour of man! Slowly the heavenly army retired; back up through the blue abyss the angels disappeared; the light faded from the firmament; the voices died away in the distance of the Infinite; the gates of God's glory closed upon His envoys; the message of peace had been proclaimed to men; the Infant remained with the Holy Mother, and the long and heavy path of thirty-three years of suffering was commenced. The shepherds went back to their fagot fires, the sheep returned to their pasture patches, the watch-dogs fell asleep by their masters, the stars shone brilliantly in the sky above, the milky way spanned the blue empyrean, and the December blast swept down from beyond the Jordan. The thousands slept on in the city of David, and the great world rolled upon its axis, just as if no miracle had ever taken place, just as if God had not visited the earth and the hour of man's redemption had not been fixed. Only the Holy Virgin Mother, St. Joseph—the Foster Father, and the shepherds, who were watchers by night, were present at the event and adored the Infant Jesus on His appearance as man. Not one of the vast throng knew that his own salvation was in the balance and that his Saviour was outside the city walls.

That scene has been described by inspired writers and by historians and