

THE FIRST CHRISTMAS CAROL.

"Glory to God in the highest, and on earth peace,
good will towards men" Luke ii. 14.

Such was the first Christmas anthem! such the first Christmas carol! Fully to understand the circumstances we must bear in mind that in Palestine the flocks are led out into the mountains to feed, but it is necessary that one should watch them day and night. Upon a plateau upon the mountain side, is a flock of sheep, some grazing, their bells sounding drowsily through the night, others sleeping; upon an abruptly rising eminence a group of shepherds recline near a watch fire. At times they gaze on the dim landscape lying below them, bathed in the calm moonlight. At times they converse together in subdued tones, as though overawed by the solemn stillness and serenity of the night season. Then in silence they musingly turn their eyes to the blue vault above them, jewelled with its myriad constellations, and as they trace the progress of some larger planet, they are thrilled by the stilly majesty of the time and scene—as though they trod on haunted ground. The hush of nature is unbroken, save by the voices of the night—

"A slumberous sound—a sound that brings

The feeling of a dream—

As of innumerable wings,

As, when the bell no longer swings,

Faint the hollow murmurings

O'er meadows, lake, and stream."

As they gazed, suddenly a pure, dazzling light floods the heavens, and eclipsing the bright stars, strikes the shepherds with terror.

While they are standing transfixed, a radiant, beauteous being appears to them floating in brilliant glory. And in a voice more full of music than the tinkling rill, bids them "Fear not; for, behold, I bring you good tidings of great joy, which shall be to all people:

for unto you is born this day a Saviour, who is Christ the Lord." Then swells the harmony of sweet seraphic voices on the throbbing air. The heavens vibrate with the glad euphonious sound until the mountains echo back a loud "Amen." The angels are gone, the glory shrunk back from mortal vision, and the shepherds stand trembling in the cold light of the stars. Well might the angel declare, "I bring you tidings of great joy," and the countless hosts of heaven burst forth in chorus as they beheld such depth of redeeming love!

We will dwell on the ascription of praise.

This may mean, either let glory be given to God in the highest places, i.e., in those realms above where the presence of God sheds a brilliancy beyond the splendour of many suns, or let praises in the highest degree be paid to God, or it may include both, and this I believe is the true signification. Whichever of these explanations we accept, it amounts to the same thing. Just as the Sons of God sang together for joy when God spake the Word and it was done, when a beautiful world emerged from the dark chaotic mass and the earth was decked with verdant hills and smiling valleys instead of being clothed with surging waters, so now, when the Word was made flesh and God the Son Oh marvel of marvels! lay cradled in a manger of a mean stable; when they saw the Word going forth to renovate the shapeless, gloomy ruins of man's moral character, again Heaven echoes with their hymns extolling the mercy and wisdom of God. "Glory to God in the highest" burst from ten thousand lips. Their songs were evoked by their wonderful display of the Divine attributes of love and forgiveness; by the thoughts of the souls pining in the dark valley of the shadow of death, upon whom a light was now arising, whose mild rays should

cheer and guide them in their passage through it; this fresh instance of God's fulfilling His part of the covenant to the last iota; this new proof of the stability of Divine truth in the fulfillment of many gracious promises. When we ponder on the intense pleasure the angels find in the work of Redemption, inasmuch as it redounds to the glory of God, does not a deep blush of shame mantle our faces that we are so indifferent, that our flame of gratitude burns so feebly? Deep, unspeakably deep, should be the feeling of thankfulness in all our hearts. Still, few thoughts of this occupy the minds even of many who have tasted that the Lord is gracious.

An act of great kindness from a fellow-man is met with loud expressions of gratitude, and very properly, too. But if ingratitude for temporal benefits is black, how much deeper the dye of ingratitude for the inestimable gift of eternal life! Our Church now specially invites us to celebrate the clemency of Jehovah, and give, as it were, a new impulse to that sense of gratitude. But few, very few, make this use of Christmas. True, it is a season of joy to them, and year by year its return is hailed with unabated delight. But it is because Christmas season is marked by the reunion of families and friends, and a round of more or less harmless feasting, because a sociability pervades, and wherever we go there is a hearty welcome, with cheerful good wishes and joviality. But the true cause of joy—the source of the institution—is too much lost sight of. Even Christmas Day—the memorial day of God Himself assuming mortal flesh, and tabernacling among men for their salvation—is often kept as a day of unhallowed mirth and debauchery. It is appalling to think that such is too frequently the case! May Christmas joys kindle in our breasts deeper gratitude to God, and an angelic joy in the salvation of sinners.

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