



VIEW OF BETHLEHEM FROM THE SHEPHERD'S FIELD.

THE OLDEST CHRISTMAS IN THE WORLD.

BY FRED MYRON COLBY.

It is difficult to imagine Christmas where there is no cold weather and people wear muslin instead of nice, warm, comfortable wools and furs. But what would you think of observing a Christmas where there was no Christ, no cross, no babe in the manger, and no Santa Claus? Yet this is what they did in Egypt thousands of years before our Saviour was born. At least those old dwellers by the Nile, whose mummies are being unearthed in such strange fashion to-day, celebrated a December festival that was more generally observed even than ours. It was closely allied too in spirit to the modern Christmas, thus showing that however diverse in habits, customs, and religious ideas nations may be, still there are identical principles embraced by all that act as friendly links between the present and the past. So it is pleasant rather than otherwise to find that those quaint people who now sleep in their rocky tombs, had a ceremonial anniversary, falling in the Egyptian calendar at the very time of our Christmas, and which celebrated an interesting religious legend, as precious to them as our gospel truth is to us.

This ancient Egyptian Christmas, the very oldest that we know of, was known as the Festival of Horus.

Perhaps no other race was ever so profoundly religious as the old Egyptians. The most important element in the life of any nation, that which beyond aught else forms and influences its character, which underlies all its customs and comes to the surface in a thousand various and surprising ways is always its religion. But with the dwellers by the Nile their religion was everything. The whole being of the people was permeated by it. Literature and science were little more than branches of theology. The every-day life of an Egyptian was guarded and directed by a series of religious precepts and usages. Every province had its special divinities, its own peculiar rites, its special sacred animals.

But though there were so many deities, and, by the way, those different gods were not so much personalities as personifications (my young readers must look into the dictionary for the meaning of these words if they do not understand them), they had but one great Worshipped One. Their fundamental doctrine was that God is one, unrepresented, invisible. As God, however, acts upon the world, his various attributes or modes of manifestation were represented in various forms. As the Creator he was Ptah; as the Revealer he was Amun; as the Benefactor and Judge of men, he was Osiris, and so on through an endless line of primary, secondary, and tertiary characters, which, to the uneducated became in process of time so many separate divinities.

Osiris was practically the god worshipped in Egypt; since, while all other worships were local, his was universal. He was called the "Elders," the "King of the Gods," the "Lord of Life," the "Eternal Ruler," the "Manifestor of Good," and many other titles. A peculiar character of mildness, goodness, and beneficence attached to him. Associated with him always was Isis, his wife, and their child

Har or Horus. And here we find the first instance of a trinity, so blending and interchanging their attributes that they were emphatically one in three and three in one.

There is a vagueness, an indistinctness, in the theology of that ancient creed, at least it seems so to us who are accustomed to the clear cut definitions of Christianity; and yet there seems to have been something like our idea of the triune Godhead shadowed in the story of Isis, Osiris, and Horus. But it was shadowed, not revealed. Each sustained every relation of a complete life to the other, and in different phases of their worship one member became relatively another; only tenaciously Isis was the feminine one of the triad. It is a beautiful illustration of the gallantry of those old pagans, and of their reverence for the nobleness and worth of maternal life, that in the mention of the three names together, Isis, Osiris, and Horus, the mild goddess was always named first.

The most interesting article of Egyptian mythology is the appearance of Osiris on earth for the benefit of mankind, under the title of Manifestor of Goodness and Truth; his death by the malice of Seth and Typhon, the Evil One, and his burial and resurrection. It was this legend which was brought in the Festival of Horus. The whole celebration was designed to illustrate the story of the Holy Family, Isis, Osiris, and Horus, and symbolically taught resurrection, judgment, the punishment of sin, the temporary triumph of evil, and the ultimate victory of good.

All the latter part of the month Chioek—the December of the Egyptians, was devoted to this celebration, which had its culmination about the season of our own sacred and festive holiday. Every day of the ceremonial had its designated part in the programme. The whole population turned out; the temples smoked with incense, and the palaces were radiant with light. There were gay processions, there were shouting and music, there was crowning with garlands, there was scattering of flowers.

It must have been a grand affair, this Egyptian festival of Horus, in the old days of the Thothmes and the Ramesses. We can imagine the cities and villages all in their glory, the stately Nile flowing through them, all its waters covered with barges and pleasure galleys, its shores bordered by the pillared porticoes of villas, the propylæe of temples, and by groves and gardens; beyond, on the sandy plain, the pyramids towering aloft, vast and mighty like the works of fabled genii; and everywhere the gleaming sunlight flashing upon bright stuccoed walls and columns, and grim sphinxes and graceful obelisks, and river wave and rustling palms, steeping every color in a golden glow.

Very strange to us would seem some of the customs of that long-ago Pagan Christmas. For four successive days a cow, emblematical of Isis, was veiled in black and led about by a crowd of devotees, who beat their breasts, in memory of the supposed disappearance of Osiris from the earth and his wife's search for him, while in memory of his recovery a procession was made to the great temple of the deity, the priests carrying a sacred ark, and an image or emblem of Osiris fashioned out of earth and water, having been placed in it the declaration was made, "Osiris is found! Osiris is found!" amid general rejoicing.

On the last day of all took place "The

Procession of the Obelisk." This was the crowning ceremonial in honor of Horus, as the youthful or rising sun. The day's ceremonial opened with a hymn sung to the god at the temples celebrating his countless excellencies. Then his image was

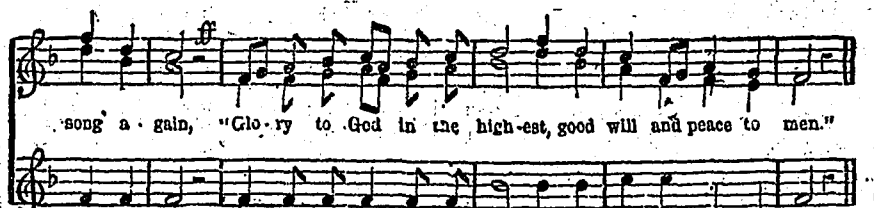
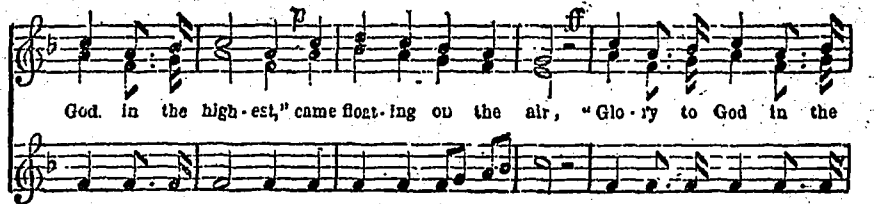
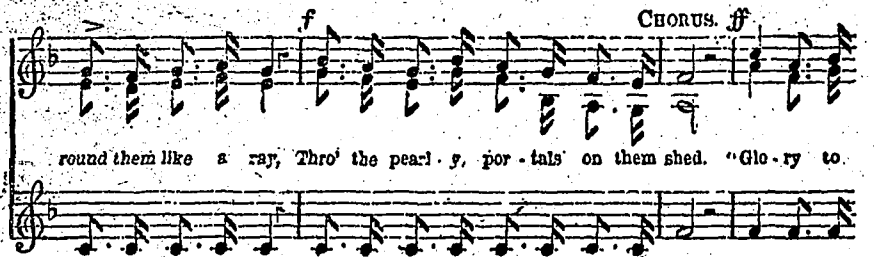
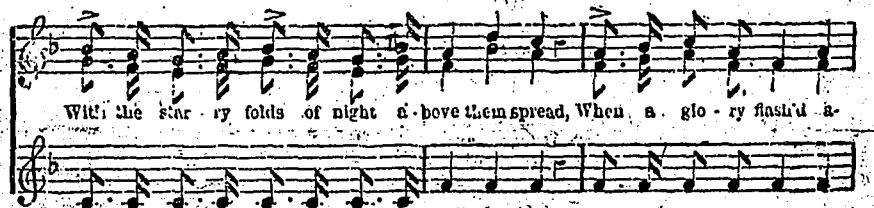
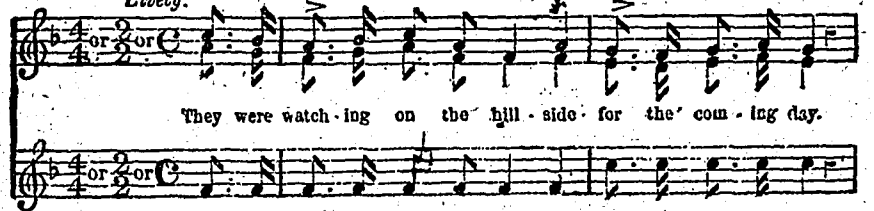
brought out, that of a beautiful youth with a hawk's head surrounded by the double crown of the two Egypts, with the sacred asp in front, while in his hands he bore the symbol of life and the sceptre. The procession, numbering thousands, marched to an obelisk or pillar, on which was recorded the dates of the rising and setting sun for the year, and then a sacrifice took place of a dog, a sheep, and a cat, these animals all having helped either with finding of the body of Osiris, or in gaining for Horus the victory of Typhon.

The myth was the picture of the daily life of the sun combating darkness, yet at last succumbing to it, to appear again in renewed splendor, as the young Horus triumphs over Typhon. It was also a picture of human life, its perpetual conflict and final seeming destruction, to be restored in the new youth of a brighter existence. In this view suffering is not wholly evil, but has its beneficent aspect in the accomplishment of final good.

Thus, in the long-ago ages, before the infant Jesus had slumbered in his Christmas cradle at Bethlehem, the religious thought of a nation and the religious needs of a people foreshadowed the unfolding of the present dispensation.—*Illustrated Christian Weekly.*

CHRISTMAS CAROL—SHEPHERDS WATCHING.

Lively.



Louder swell the joyful anthems of the angel throng,
Over hill and dale the strains enchanted float;
See the wond'ring shepherds listening to the song,
Trembling, yet rejoicing at the sight.
CHORUS.—"Glory to God in the highest," etc.

O the joyful, joyful tidings! for to you is born
Christ, the wondrous Saviour, and the mighty King;
Hail ye waiting nations! hail the happy morn,
Joyful tidings unto you I bring.
CHORUS.—"Glory to God in the highest," etc.