

CHRISTMAS IN BETHLEHEM.

G. W. WOOD IN 'SUNDAY MAGAZINE.'

'But to come to the little hamlet where Christ was born; how shall I find the words to describe to you the Cave of the Saviour? And that manger in which the little babe cried is to be honored by silence rather than by weak words.' So writes the great Biblical Father of the Church, St. Jerome, who at the close of the fourth century took up his abode in one of the grottoes near the birthplace of our Lord, and for thirty years devoted himself to prayer, fasting, and the translation and exposition of the Scriptures. When the devout patrician lady, Paula, arrived at Bethlehem and first entered the cavern, 'I heard her declare,' says St. Jerome, 'that with the eyes of faith she beheld the infant wrapped in swaddling clothes and crying in the manger, she saw the Magi adoring the Lord, the star shining down, the Virgin Mother giving suck, the shepherds who came by night; and in her joy she exclaimed, 'Hail, Bethlehem, house of bread, in which was born the bread that came down from Heaven; hail Ephrata, the fertile land, of which God Himself is the fruit.' In those days 'was there a nation from which there came not men to visit the holy places?' And among the multitudes of pilgrims who have thronged thither during the subsequent fifteen centuries, how many have realized the same blessed vision, how many have had borne in upon them the conviction that the events of that starry midnight actually happened as they have been recorded, and that on the earth may still be seen the veritable spot where 'the Word was made flesh'?

Of all memorable places on this changeful planet of ours, there is surely none so full of intense interest, so aglow with spiritual fervor, as this small mountain village, running eastward along the double crest of the white chalk ridge, which looks down over the olives and figs and vines of its terraced slopes into the sunny valley where Ruth, the beautiful gleaner, followed the sickle-men of Boaz as they worked among the ripe April barley. Long before that idyllic episode the region was hallowed by the pillar which Jacob set up to the north of the existing town, for there the beloved Rachel died, leaving the 'son of her sorrow' to become the 'son of the right hand' of the patriarch in his bereaved old age. Here, too, Ruth's great-grandson was born. Here amid the solitude of the bare hills lie lay out in the watches of the night, under the sweet influences of the Pleiades and banded Orion and the seven-starred Mazzaroth. Here he led his flock through 'green pastures' and beside 'waters of rest.' Here he took the lion by the beard, as one sees the Assyrian kings take him in the sculptures, and slew him. Hither, too, when the prophet Samuel visited the house of Jesse, he came from the sheepfolds; 'ruddy and of a beautiful countenance and goodly to look to,' and was anointed king in the midst of his brethren.

Bethlehem was among the holy places which excited the angry derision of the Romans. 'From Hadrian to Constantine,' says St. Jerome, 'for a period of about one hundred and eighty years, an image of Jupiter was adored on the site of the Resurrection, and on the Hill of the Cross a marble statue of Venus was consecrated by the Gentiles; the authors of persecution thinking that they would deprive us of our faith in the Resurrection and the Cross if they polluted these holy sites. Our Bethlehem, that most august spot in the world, was overshadowed by a grove of Tannuz, and in the cave in which the infant Christ wept women bewailed the darling of Venus.' Some sixteen years before Jerome's time, however, the trees which screened the rites of this obscene worship were uprooted, and the splendid basilica of St. Helena, the mother of Constantine—the oldest Christian church in existence—sprang up over the cave of the Nativity. As one approaches Bethlehem one sees with wonder the enormous pile, grey with the weathering of centuries, and the Latin, Greek, and Armenian convents massed closely about it. Two of the three great arched gateways which opened into the spacious porch were completely blocked up with stone in the days when there was danger from Mohammedan violence, and in

the third no more than a low narrow entrance has been left.

The interior of the church consists of a nave and four aisles supported by Corinthian pillars, which are said to have once stood in the porches of the last Temple at Jerusalem; but little survives of the ancient splendor of the edifice. Time has effaced the gilding and brilliant coloring of the high pointed roof, and only fragments remain of the mosaics representing the old-time Churches, the lineage of Joseph, and possibly scenes in the life of our Lord. On the pillars may yet be traced scratchings of the crests of the warriors of the Crusades. The choir is walled off from the body of the church and divided into two chapels; one for the Greeks, the other for the Armenians. From each a spiral staircase descends to the cavern where 'unto us a child was born.' A third staircase, hewn in the rock, leads from St. Catherine's, the church of the Latins, on the north side of the choir. The pilgrim who descends by it passes through an oblong chamber, at one

and one's eyes grow dim at the vivid recollection of that marvellous birth-night nineteen centuries ago, at the sight of that small semicircular niche with its array of silver lamps burning day and night over the silver star on the pavement. That star marks the point in the heavens where His star appeared to the Magi to stand still, and around the marble slab one reads the inscription—

HIC DE VIRGINE MARIA JESUS CHRISTUS NATUS EST.

'Here Christ Jesus was born of the Virgin Mary.'

Of all seasons of the year the most appropriate for a visit to the scene of the Nativity is the feast of Christmas, but it is to be feared that few of my readers would be seriously impressed by the ceremonial which attracts the vast concourse of pilgrims and sightseers on that memorable night. Could one stand or kneel alone for an hour after midnight in that sacred cave, it might be possible to come forth

the most numerous of all. The number who visit the holy places annually was set down a year or two ago at five thousand, and it is said to be constantly increasing. 'There is hardly a village in Russia,' writes Laurence Oliphant, 'in which there is not to be found a bottle of Jordan water. Indeed the Holy City plays a greater part in the Greek religion than it does in the Latin, and the affections of the Orthodox are centred on these shrines to a degree unknown among Christians of any other denomination. There is not a Russian pilgrim who visits Jerusalem who does not hope that he may live to see the day when it will become a Russian city, and who does not long for the call to a holy war, the object of which shall be the exclusive possession by Russia of the Church of the Holy Sepulchre and of the city in which it stands.'

A curious spectacle these pilgrims present as, headed by their pope, with his strange brimless hat, his long beard, and flowing garments, they wend their way among the rugged hills and under the ardent skies of Palestine—men, women, and children, clothed in fur caps and thick woollen coats, and bearing their bundles of household necessities. In their bosoms burn the same enthusiasm as that which prompted our English ancestors to leave legacies for the equipment of some sturdy knight when there should be a pilgrimage to the Holy Land, which glowed in the breast of the 'Good Sir James' when he bore the heart of the Bruce on that splendid but fatal journey to the East.

And who can marvel that it should be so? Who, indeed, is there that does not understand that feeling, even if he does not share it?

THE CHRISTMAS PILGRIMAGE.

(BETHLEHEM.)

What means this waiting throng?

Whence have these weary, way-worn wanderers come?

Why rises, in strange tongues, the expectant hum,

Like that tense under-song

The joyful Jordan voices in the spring

Till Hermon harkens, leaning grandly down,

And wearing still his shimmering snowy crown?

Soon will these murmuring lips with ardor sing,

And soon these lifted faces, wan or brown,

Glow into worship that is rapturing.

Back will be thrown the consecrated door,

And then these feet, from many a distant shore,

Do privileged to press the hallowed floor.

Why have they come,—the hardy mountaineer
From Lebanon's cedars and their checkered
shade?

The merchant and the snowy-mantled maid

Who holds great Nilus dear?

Why have they come,—the men with restless eyes

And pallid cheeks that tell of norland skies?

Why have they come,—the Latin and the Greek?

Do pilgrims thus this sanctuary seek

Because 'twas here

For year on fiery year

The red earth drank

The deluged blood of Paynim and of Frank?

Or do they surge to see

The antique symmetry

Of springing arch and carved pillar line,

In this old holy house of Constantine?

Ah, no! ah, no! To them the memory

Of war is not, and monarchs play no part

In any thought that stirs an eager heart.

They have no eyes to see

A single graceful groining. What care they

If here, upon a bygone Christmas-Day,

The King-crusader, Baldwin, took his crown!

Or what to them the saint of blest renown

In yonder sepulchre, now crumbling clay!

Their patient feet one precious spot would press,

Their yearning eyes would lovingly caress

The time-dulled silver star

Sunk deep within the pavement, footfall-worn.

'Here, of the Virgin Mary, Christ was born.'

They read, these pilgrims who have plodded far.

They read and pass and ponder. Fow can see

The tiny chapel and the dim-lit shrine,

And feel no thrill, despite the mummery,

Of something more divine

Within the breast than ever pulsed before.

Then let us pilgrims be

Upon this sacred day we all adore!

Although our mortal feet touch not the floor,

Although our mortal eyes may not behold,

Our spirits may take flight,

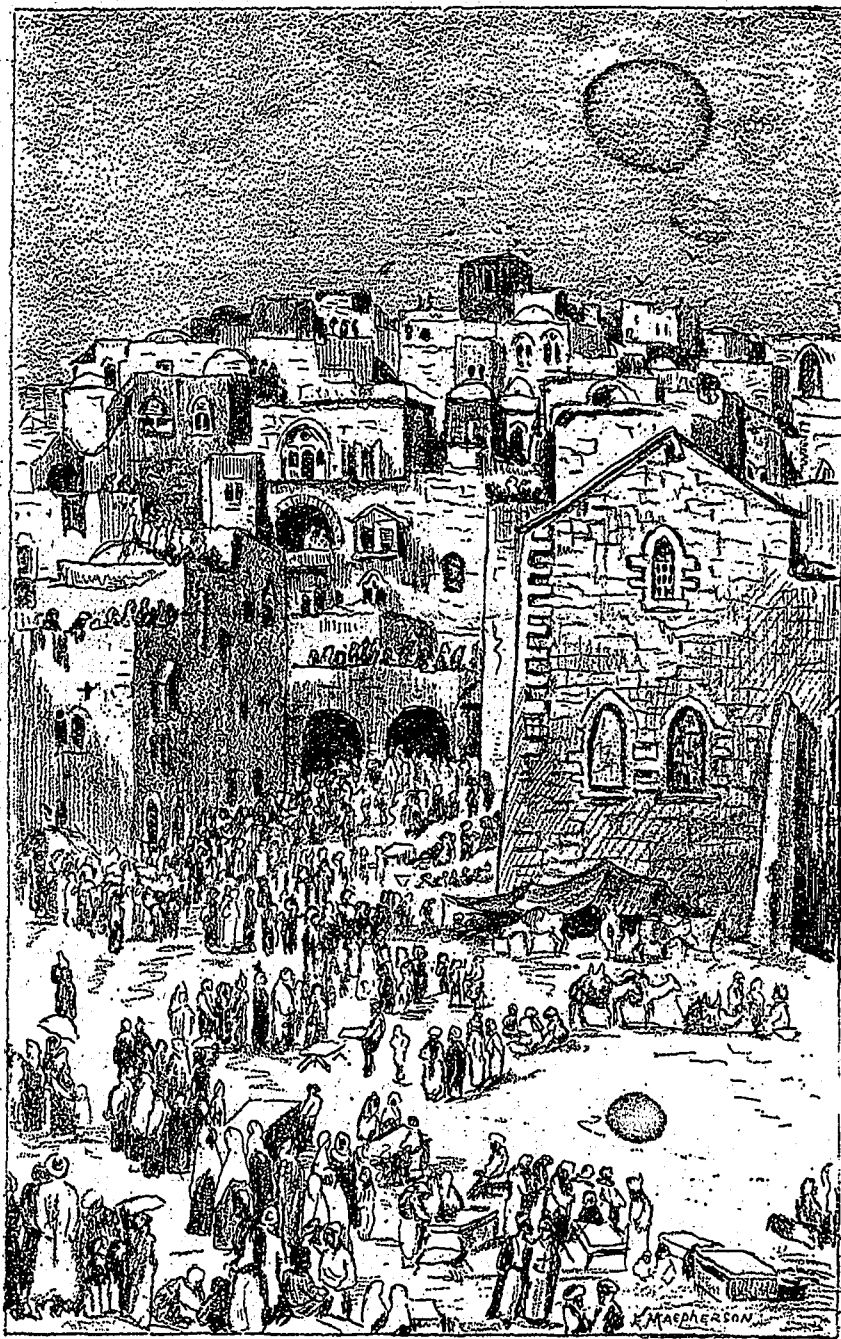
And with immortal sight

Stand where the prayerful wise-men stood of old

In ecstasy of adoration, when

They saw the Saviour of the sons of men.

—By Clinton Scollard.



CHRISTMAS DAY IN BETHLEHEM.

end of which he may see the tombs of the great Father Jerome, St. Paula, and her daughter Eustochium; while at the other he may mount the three steps which give access to the study—a vault twenty feet square and nine high—of the translator of the 'Vulgate.' Passing next the Altar of the Innocents, which marks the spot where it is said the twenty thousand children murdered by the orders of Herod were buried, and other interesting objects of questionable authenticity, the pilgrim reaches at last, by a narrow and crooked corridor, the western entrance of the cave.

And here the Saviour of mankind was born!—in this rude limestone rock-shelter, which is about ten feet high and measures thirteen yards in width by five in depth, and which the piety of the faithful has encrusted and paved with Italian marble. Little wonder that one's heart beats fast

into the daylight with a renewed heart, with an utterable consciousness of the nearness of so much that often seems so far away. And yet who shall say that many a life is not brightened by the splendid services which crowd the mountain hamlet at that gracious and hallowed time? How many a heart may be deeply moved among those close-packed rows of pleasant women in their white *eczars* and men in their gaily colored *mash-lahs*, as the waxen figure of the divine child is taken from the altar and laid in the arms of the Patriarch; and the procession, singing hymns as it goes, descends the rocky staircase to the cave, where the baby image is laid on the silver star in the pious memory of that old birth-night!

Though groups of many nationalities gather at Bethlehem at Christmastide, the contingent of Russian pilgrims is probably