

THE CHRISTMAS CHILD

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Beyond all else Christmas means children.

And beyond all children Christmas means especially one Child

Even the sad pagans of a modern day, who have rudely excluded that Divine Child from Christmas, have, because of Him, kept the day sacred to children.

Where the Christ Child is loved for Himself and is seen in the little children, who are beautifully like Him, Christmas is the day, beyond all other days, when love moves over the earth with lighted tapers, and the virtues of childhood make young once more a weary, aging humanity.

Even where the Christ Child is forgotten or ignored, His little ones for a single day waken in human hearts a new tenderness and unselfish affection. And the innocence of childhood, its unquenchable faith in the goodness of others, curve into smiles even the cynical lips that have drunk deep of sin and grown bitter in sneers.

For Christmas begins and ends with a Child. About the Infant in the manger prophecies are fulfilled, and angels sing, and the poor kneel giftless save for the unpurchasable gift of patient affection, and the rich come guilt-laden, but with a strange humility bringing low their heads, and all mankind is reborn to a new era of grace and hope and God's revelation of love and graciousness. "A child is born to us and a son is given to us," cried Isaiah in ecstatic prophecy. In a vision he saw this Child, born of a Virgin, in God's beautiful promise and sign, and his heart burst forth in the first glad Christmas greeting, "A child is born to us and a son is given to us." And from that joyful prophecy flowed all the joy and peace and Christmas spirit that coursed hopefully through the Old Law unto glorious fulfilment in the New.

Over the heads of the patiently watchful shepherds the glory of a star ripped the satin curtains of night. Then angel hands thrust back the torn shreds of gold and purple sky, and the uncontrollable joy of heaven itself leaped forth to sing of a Child.

"Glory to God in the highest," because of that Child. "And on earth peace to men of good will," who from that moment would find themselves kneeling in complete happiness beside that Golden Babe.

Startled, the shepherds looked up at the splendour flung unexpectedly into their drab lives. True peasants, they noted with instinctive relief that their lambs upon the hillside grazed unafraid either of the star, the angel messengers, or the swelling chorus. How could these lambs of the poor (later the favourite subject of the Saviour's parables) be flung into confusion by news that the Lamb of God had come to shepherd all His sheep?

"Today is born to you a Saviour who is Christ the Lord." Their slow minds were not too dull to realise that tonight their beloved Scriptures were fulfilled. This was the expected King of whom the angels sang. Startling as were the signs by which they were to recognise Him, swaddling clothes and a manger, they broke into headlong flight down the hill and flung themselves in adoration before the Child held up to them by the sweetest mother in all human history.

The childlike faith and hope of simple peasants found fulfilment in a Child. Christmas came rushing into their eventless lives on the wings of an infant's smile, and the low-voiced gratitude of a mother welcoming these first Christmas guests who, in a beautiful single gesture, adored her Son and filled her day with the sweet fragrance of their Christmas greeting.

"Where is He that was born King of the Jews?"

The question, repeated a thousand times along their tedious way through the desert and sprawling villages and nomadic tribes and smug, white-roofed cities, was answered with shrugged shoulders and cynically turned backs, with significant touching of foreheads and frankly contemptuous laughter.

Undismayed, the Magi were drawn forward on their quest by the vague hope of finding a Child.

More than likely they dreamed of palace gates swinging wide to welcome them as grooms swept forward to catch their camels by their tinkling bridles and pages helped them to dismount.

Surely the child of a king would rest upon the softest down, under coverlets of purple damask. Hushed attendants

might permit them a glimpse of newborn royalty between the crossed lances of sleepless sentinels. Yet even this glimpse would be reward enough, they felt, for their weary desert road, the tireless swaying of their camels and the night-long journeys in pursuit of a forward moving star.

For here was a Child tall enough to light a blaze in the heavens. In the ancient papyri written for a mighty Cyrus by a Jew named Daniel, they were assured that this was no ordinary child who was born under a flaming star.

Were they at first, even for an instant, bitterly taken aback? Did they almost turn away in disappointment from the dark mouth of this unguarded stable? Probably they caught up their silken gowns as they stepped through cattle pens and sheepfolds to the dark hill cave, unlighted except for the now motionless star.

But when they saw the Child, all of Christmas welled up in their souls. What did it matter that He lay, not on orient silk, but on crackling straw; that an exquisite maid and a dignified carpenter (strange contradiction, to their aristocratic minds, a carpenter with such poise and dignity) were His only courtiers; that the bleak walls of the stable, rough-hewn from the black earth of the hill, were bare of heraldic standards or banners of scarlet and gold; that no sentries flashed repelling swords to hold back intruders?

Faith swept them forward in its high tide. A Child they had come to seek. Yet in all the world there was no child like this.

He wore His swaddling clothes as if they were Tyrian purple. He lay in a manger that seemed like a conquered world. He opened His tiny arms, and their circle was vast enough to embrace all humanity. He smiled, and the light of a new era dawned.

They had come to find a child king who was to conquer and save the world. Naturally they had dreamed of a kingship proved by files of palace guards and fluttering choirs of nurses, by carved ebony and beaten gold upon his crib, and breathless statesmen adding his name to the line of royal ancestors—he the heir of their greatness and their petty crimes, their occasional acts of kingliness and their frequent baseness and stupid cruelty and criminal lust. They knew no other kings nor sons of kings than these.

They had not dared dream of a Child whose evident kingship made a palace out of a stable and a throne out of straw heaped for oxen. They had not wildly imagined a sovereign who could conquer because he was without weapons and who won His followers, not by the cold aloofness of power, but by the warm approachableness of His weakness and His love.

Before this Child of the poor these rich men eagerly poured the tribute of their gifts. Before this Infant who contained all that the world needed to save it, these wise men bent submissive knees.

Although the shepherds in their simple ignorance and the Magi in their deep wisdom were unaware of it, around the Child, from the very beginning, vortexed the complete drama of humanity's best and basest emotions.

He had been welcomed, as every great benefactor of humanity is welcomed, with cruel indifference and rudely slammed doors. Yet, if the doors of earth were barred in His face, the gates of heaven broken open to welcome Him.

No child had ever felt, even in the heart of the most unselfish mother, the maternal love that cushioned His little body and wrapped securely His soul against the bitter winds of men's careless ingratitude. But from the neighbouring Bethlehem, though song rose, it was not sung to honour His birthday. The hands that clasped in glad welcome to relatives were hands that had recently waved away the mother of the Son of God. The warm love of a mother was never more pitifully needed than on that night, when the stinging winds blew callously and ungraciously, less from the hills than from every door and window in His own city.

If there was quick faith in the adoration of the shepherds, there was another sort of faith in the cruel planning of the king who ruled in Jerusalem. Even as the Magi knelt to adore Him, swords were being sharpened in expectation of His throat. The last traces of rust disappeared from spear points, and brutal hands, already instructed in murder, and waiting for orders, gripped tighter the hefts.

Herod, paying unconscious tribute to the Child he had never seen, paced the floor of his council chamber, hatred eating at his vitals. Soon, he felt, the triumphant faith of these Magi would place the Child within easy reach of sword blade and spear point and death.

The faith of the Magi brought them to their knees in grateful adoration. The faith of Herod brought him to his feet, thirsting for murder.

If Joseph watched against harm, a Roman emperor, long leagues away, issued his orders that there should be no king but Caesar, and bought up in good round gold the loyalty of high priests, who knew well that a Child must be born in Bethlehem who would override Rome and shake them from their secure positions. Even as Christmas dawned, Good Friday was being prepared.

Maternal love and the simple devotion of a gentleman of noble but reduced circumstances; the love of the world's purest hearts and the hatred of its vilest; a wedding of heaven to earth as angels sang of glorious news, and with it the cold uninterestedness of tight little huts and tighter little souls; the romance of a hurried quest across half the known world; murder stalking from a palace and making the first Christian martyrs in the homes of harmless peasants; spontaneous faith eagerly given and hospitality ignobly denied; the surging of heaven itself in a mighty shout of joy and the resentful stirring of earth asleep in its own ugly apathy—all these were present about this Child at the moment of His birth.

Life in its completeness of virtue and vice, enthusiasm and dark contempt, keenest joy and acutest sorrow, sublime love and blackest hate, high adventuring and bleak doubt, circled the crib of the Christmas Child.

Undoubtedly, as the shepherds returned to their flocks, they remembered only that the Babe was beautiful, the mother unforgettably lovely, and the man wonderfully gracious. And they knew that they felt in their souls a joy that they had never known before.

The Magi, however, travelled back by slow stages. They must take time to reason and reflect. And surely their trained minds marvelled at the singular appropriateness of a Child's being sent to save the sad old world and end the wearisome night.

If they had expected to find a great captain at their journey's end, they now knew how sharp would have been their disappointment.

For history had written the record of all too many captains thundering across continents, their progress marked by collapsing cities and the burning huts of farmers, by children whimpering in the shadow of oak trees, and women hiding their faces from the memory of brutal leers and their own shame.

The old world had been magnificent in the flowering of its conquerors. They had clanked triumphantly along a hundred highways. Resistlessly they had piled new empires on the ruins of those they had crushed. Atop these swaggering tyrannies they had sat, demanding the tribute of gold and lives, while slaves toiled to death beneath dark foundations and women stifled their tears lest coursing hounds, mail-clad and erect as men, might find them to their ruin.

No need of captains now! The world needed, and, happily, the Magi remembered, the world had received, a Child.

Great philosophers had solemnly sat in their quiet groves or among their white marble pillars, and twined grape leaves in the hair of truth. The Magi almost shuddered as they remembered these men who had found truth only to mock it.

They had treated philosophy as a tricky game with which to prove one's glib tongue or to sharpen a bitter eloquence. If today they proved that black was black, they tomorrow felt a perverse joy in proving that black was really dull grey, and the next day that it was blood-red or yellow as the hair of a girl or the skin of a tiger. Even they who had seen truth with clear eyes and had written of it with revealing pen had turned from high thought to base living. They had found the one true God and had left Him to burn incense to the gods of lust and thievery, or worshipped their own animal instincts or the vapid applause of the mob.

Truth had been deserted, even by those who knew it best, for the drinking flagon and the dancing girl, for the groves of Venus and the cellars of Bacchus, for the favour of a ruler who played, drunk or sober, at being divine, or for the smelly shouts of a populace who were bored by any truth that was not flattering or amusing.

Scientists, then, as in every other age, were strangely preoccupied, not with giving life, but with teaching men to deal death more effectively. The very roads along which the Magi travelled had been built by scientific men to hasten the conquering march of armies, not to quicken the advance of culture or the sacred progress of God.

The Magi, knowing history, knew these men had not saved, could not save, the world. Knowing nothing of the future,

they could hardly guess that in this Child would be revealed the Captain, Philosopher, Guide of the Scientist, Beneficent Conqueror, King of Kings.

“Out of thee, Bethlehem,” had sung the prophet, “shall come the captain who will rule my people Israel.”

Even the priests, who through this prophecy sent the Magi forward to Bethlehem while they turned back to count their money or court their wives, had told them this. This Child would some day be the Captain of the armies of the Most High, leading them out to His peaceful conquest of the world.

Under that Captain white uniformed companies of virgins would march with red-caped squadrons of martyrs, while vanguards of apostles would swing in advance of legions of doctors and confessors. And over all, the conquering standard of the cross!

Here was to be a Captain whose conquered victims loved Him with grateful, devoted love. The more completely they were conquered, the more deeply would they love Him. Here was a Conqueror whose pathway would be lined, not with the prostrate bodies of helpless victims, but with the upright figures of the saints.

Later all thinkers were to lift their heads in astonished acknowledgment as He said calmly, “I am the truth.” And the world would sit as children at His feet.

Incarnate philosophy, revealed theology, the sum and circle of all essential truth, this Child was to give to a truth-hungry world a knowledge that was more than human, and a wisdom that was divine. For the first time men would learn of a truth that did not merely feed the mind. His was a truth that made the heart glow and the tongue shout for joy.

And, as wise men had knelt, humbly, learning wisdom from a Babe who lay in a rough-hewn manger, so great philosophers would use as their supremest textbook His carved figure fixed upon two crossed sticks.

While scientists with painful searching discovered laws in nature, He was the God who had made those laws. His providence had given to these basic elements their powers and the endless combinations on which science mounts to new achievements. “By Him and in Him were all things made, and without Him was made nothing that was made.”

One of the Magi, according to a tradition, lived to see the Child grown to manhood. If this was so, he saw in Him a poet who spoke poetry in beautiful parables, and lived poetry in every kindly gesture and every loving act.

He saw a King who captured by personal fascination and goodness, and held captive by generous love. He saw the very King of Kings, who walked among His people and won His endless kingdom only when the devastating charge of His enemies scattered His friends at the base of Calvary’s hill, flung Him in final assault to its height, and there inflicted on Him the apparent defeat of death.

And if he stood near the cross, that Wise Man could read in the dying eyes of the Saviour the same love and tenderness and pitiful searching of the world that he had seen in the eyes of the Child in the crib.

The Magi rode back happy with a peace they had never known before. From the Child they had drunk deep of the happiness that is Christmas. Yet, as they pondered, they realised that in this Child they had really seen the birth of a new world. Not as Captain nor Scientist nor Philosopher nor Poet nor even as King would they remember Him. He was to them the Child, and, as a Child, the symbol of all that the tired, sick, weary old world needed.

Weary with the sickness of sin, the world needed a new birth. Desperate after centuries of deluding dreams and exhausting struggles, the world needed the dawn of a new hope.

And in the Child whom they had seen and worshipped, and to whom all mankind would return with each recurring Christmastide, was the new life that was so badly needed.

“I have come that they may have life, and have it more abundantly.” In every child that is born lies new hope for each generation. But in this Child lay hope for all mankind. From His infant weakness was to come the renewal of human strength. His young life was hope for the feeble old world. In His eyes was the prophetic vision of a new-born age that would find a new law of life, pledge itself to a new testament, proclaim to the world the fulfilment of a new gospel, announce the good news for which, in darkness and despair, the nations had sat—wearily waiting.

Strangely enough, within His infant soul were the very virtues out of which the new humanity was to fashion itself and the new age to rise: sinlessness and purity, a trusting faith in the heavenly Father, a simplicity more beautiful than all the

elaborate dreams of empire builders and the intricate conceptions of artists.

How desperately old had man grown in his sin! Sin had lined his face and bent his back as it urged him relentlessly onward in its stupid, futile treadmill.

Slaves, under the lash of cruelty, grew feeble and broken though their years were still the years of youth. Women looked out from eyes made old by tears and the searing glare of vice. The souls of little children stared out from sadly old bodies, wise beyond their years with a wisdom taught them by sin-stodgy mothers and vice-warped sires.

Old nations crumbled under the weight, not of years, but of tyrannies and ugly idolatries, greed and debilitating lust.

Even the temple of God seemed very old with its crafty-eyed priests stroking long beards amid their ugly haggling over unimportant forms of worship, while wearisome commerce ran the corridors and bleated before the silken curtain of the Holy of Holies. Impurity, that ages as does no other sin, sent world conquerors to early and filthy graves, set to trembling the legs of athletes and philosophers, carved ugly wrinkles into faces that yesterday were fresh as that of the prodigal still in his father's house, or as those of the ladies of pleasure chosen for their youth to hurry him on his road to the pigsty and ageing disillusionment.

Then came this Child with the ageless youth that is sinlessness. Not until the weight of humanity's sin pressed the blood from His crushed body in the agony of Gethsemane would His years be measured except in growth of body, in wisdom of mind, in grace of soul.

His face would be unlined and unwrinkled till the end. His eyes would glow with the quick enthusiasm of youth. Children would flock to Him, loving His eager, youthful response.

Then, through a death brought about, not by ageing body or exhausted strength, but by the external pressure of others' sin that had not touched His own soul, He would enter upon the ageless youth of the Resurrection, and, Himself immortal, pass down sinless youth throughout all time.

From Him this youth flowed as from an inexhaustible fountain to the weary world. The ageing power of sin was thwarted.

Mary, His mother, moved through life always a virgin, always sinless, always young. John, the Beloved, brought Him the quick love of his youth; loved Him in maturity with the undimmed fire of young enthusiasm; and dreamed the glorious dreams of youth even when a hundred years had, with inverted alchemy, turned to silver his yellow-gold hair.

Peter, mature and venerable when we first meet him, grows young in the company of His Master. Like a young man, he races across Jerusalem at news of the Resurrection. Like a young athlete, he leaps into the sea to swim to Christ, revealing Himself upon the shore. With the optimism of youth he faces the task of conquering a world that defies conquest, and youthfully does his accomplished work. Faced with martyrdom, he youthfully begs that the cross be inverted. He died in youthful love, and, by an almost sacred jest, upside down in what he knew to be a topsy-turvy world.

Saints never grow old. Their ageless life flows from the Child of the Christmastide. And though this life first touches their souls, it is reflected beautifully in their bodies. Like Anthony the hermit, they may pass the century mark, yet their eyes are the eyes of youth and their lips curve easily in prayer, in love, in laughter.

Martyrs laughing at threat of death; virgins singing their way through the age-old assaults of temptation; venerable doctors dropping their pens to burst into love songs to Mary; devoted mothers looking upon their petulant children with eyes young and alert and beautiful; brave men, weary with life's bitter relentlessness, yet smiling ecstatically as they kneel before the Tabernacle; pure young men and women, unspoiled and unaged, moving with steady steps and clear eyes among a generation of young people that are sophisticated, bored, old with impurity and soul-sick with cynicism; nuns whose faces are guiltless of wrinkles as their souls are guiltless of sin; old priests dying with calm faith in humanity and the gaiety of a schoolboy bound homeward for the holidays—all these have drunk deep of the inexhaustible youth that flows from Christ the Child.

Ageless, too, is the Church that was born with Christ in Bethlehem. Its enemies are tirelessly predicting its death. Yet it moves on its way, the youngest organisation in the world. Nations totter to their graves; the Church sings its regretful requiem, and turns toward new nations still fighting up from barbarism. Peoples grow weary with the struggle to survive;

the Church lays them in their peaceful graves, and speedily baptizes their successors.

Unending youth flows from the Child of Bethlehem to the Church, to the nations that remain faithful, to the individual man or woman who finds the Fountain of Youth that sprang up in the darkness of a hillside the night Christ was born.

The disillusioned world into which Christ was born had lost the child-like gift of faith. There was no Father in heaven watching over a beloved world.

God seemed to the Jews far less a Father than a wrathful Judge. To the pagans heaven was filled with capricious super-mortals, greater in their powers, but greater, too, in their callous selfishness. Men felt themselves the playthings of the mocking Fates, who tossed them about like the toys of spoiled children.

Then Christ the Child was born, and all this was different.

Men suddenly knew that they were God's beloved children, for He loved them well enough to give them His only begotten Son to be their brother and their Saviour.

Faith in a provident God was born again there in the shadowy stable of Bethlehem. It was a faith that lifted a supine world to its feet and raised its eyes to the Father, Who watched hopefully from a hill even when His children ran the prodigal ways of sin; Who, like a shepherd, searched for them among the brambles of the mountain-side; Who rewarded with an infinite love those who freely gave Him their love, and Who repaid the puny efforts of His children as the most doting father had never repaid his favourite child.

Faith is Christian. Cynicism is pagan. Trust in God is born of Christ. Despair of the gods is the hopeless blight of the religions that know not Bethlehem. Cynicism, like sin, wearies the heart of man to death. But the reasons for cynicism died when the world was given its vision of the Father Whose Child was born in Bethlehem for love of His brothers and sisters.

All the mystery of childhood was wrapped in the body of the Child of the Christmastide. All of childhood's unfulfilled promise, all of infancy's limitless expectations, rested upon His tiny head.

As His mother dreamed (far all mothers dream the same precious dreams) over the Child against her breast, she alone knew that the fullness of her expectations could not match the fullness of His completed promise. The undeveloped mystery of His infancy would expand into the radiant mystery of His manhood.

Slowly, as mothers will, she uncurled the petal fingers of her Child. Absurd it seemed that these should be the hands of the One who shaped the suns and planets and, with compelling finger, traced the course of every speeding star.

Hardly less absurd, however, was the vision that these hands, wrapped sleepily about her finger, touching warmly her breast, should become calloused with the hammer and the plane with which He would earn her food. When the fullness of time came, and they had forever dropped the carpenter's tools, these hands (could she, mother-like, foresee all this?) would lift above a tensely eager people, gesturing to the lovely flow of His sermons and His parables, touching sin-ridden bodies and lifting them to their feet, stroking sin-scarred foreheads until they became virgin white and calm, multiplying bread and changing water into wine, and then, in stranger miracle, lifting the bread and wine into more precious substances.

Of all the instruments of His carpenter's trade, these hands would at the end cling only to the nails, till in his palms red wounds glowed with the glory of the Resurrection.

Sleepily His baby lips curved in a smile against the warm valley in her throat. Silent now, some day, her mother's heart knew clearly, they would utter words that would echo and re-echo endlessly through time and eternity.

First they would speak her name—lovingly. Then they would honour His Father—prayerfully. Then they would bless humanity—tenderly. Then they would call His apostles—compellingly. Then they would pour forth the revelation of His Father's truth—with authority. Then they would plead from the cross—pitifully. And in glorious climax they would speak welcome to the just and judgment to the wicked—unendingly.

Now His eyes, in the vague focuslessness of infancy, are closed. Yet all the glorious promise of those eyes! —lifted gratefully to her face; raised prayerfully to His Father; scanning the young men of the village and the lake shore for possible disciples; waiting intently for signs of faith and acceptance; pleading voicelessly with sinners; glowing with a

love that broke the passionate heart of Magdalen and the repentant heart of Peter; blazing with just anger as the whip of cords rises and falls upon the despoilers of His temple; ecstatic as he speaks of unseen truth; prophetic as He gazes into the future, glorious or bloodstained, of His Church; agonised as He faces sin in the garden and falls beneath its blows; pain-tortured as He looked from the cross to see mankind lusting for His blood; immortal, as through them shines His divinity after the Resurrection.

All these unfulfilled but certain mysteries were wrapped round in the sleeping or waking form of the Child of Bethlehem. If in our hearts we always feel that children seem closest to God (and reverently we kneel as we accept this mystery), this time we know that the Child is not merely close to God. He is God.

He is God, and God in His most appealing, most compelling manifestation. The era of the terrifying Jehovah, thundering above His disobedient people and sending the slim shaft of His lightning and the crawling vengeance of His serpents, is over.

After the sadly adult gods of paganism, old in their wickedness and cynical from their personal familiarity with sin, God comes to man as an innocent babe. After the impure animals before whom knelt Egypt and Babylon and Carthage, God manifests Himself as the one irresistible thing in all the world, a child lifting its arms for love and pity and a welcome embrace.

While God was vast and all-powerful, men often sulked under His reign. Angrily they questioned His right. His laws irked them, and they shrank back resentfully from His commands.

Surely, then, this is a new era of God's dealing with men that begins with God's begging of our love and our welcome. Apparently, here in the crib, He needs us more than we need Him. (Untrue, we know, except that in this lovely chapter we see God's insistent wooing of our hearts through the disguise of infancy.) God, Who had promised to be our host in eternity, Who offered us grandly the hospitality of heaven, now of a sudden begs hospitality and shelter from human homes and hearts.

We stand aghast, as all the believing world has stood aghast, before this mystery of the Child. God has emptied Himself of all save love. His power seems gone; for His arms are weak and helpless and His voice is stilled. No longer does He pass judgment on the world; instead the world walks by the crib, passing judgment of acceptance or rejection upon Him.

His majesty is laid aside; the angels have returned to heaven; the star fades and disappears; shepherds, in their smelly garments, kneel unafraid; and a young maid holds Infinity in her arms.

Here, in the presence of this Child, we know that God has emptied Himself of everything except His overwhelming love. Yet, with the eloquence of silence, with the power of weakness willingly assumed, with the majesty of omnipotence made infancy, and in a language so powerful that it needs no words, God, from the crib of a Child, begs for a love men cannot deny to children, and surely will not deny to the Child Who spanned infinity to reach their hearts.

So Christmas will always belong to children, because Christmas belongs to the Divine Child.

Because of Him the day is made glad with lights and music and gifts and laughter and warmth and the enveloping affection of friends and the happy shelter of homes.

Even the orphaned child finds about him on Christmas an almost yearning love he hardly knows for the rest of the year. Men must be sweet to him, as in him they see some slight image of the dear Child who was God.

Love was appallingly denied to the Child of the Christmastide. It must not be denied to the children who have been since His day. Christmas belongs to children, and yet?

Hopefully the Child, grown to manhood, spoke of His followers, who would "become as little children." "Theirs," He cried, in glorious climax, "is the kingdom of heaven."

More than that; theirs, whether they be six or sixty, stumbling in the first steps of childhood or tottering in their last feeble steps toward the grave, theirs is Christmas.

For souls are ageless, souls that have drawn their life from the crib of the ageless Child. Souls are always young if they are unblemished by sin or unwearied by the weight of evil or rejuvenated in the miraculous spring of penance. To them

the Christ Child comes as to His beloved playfellows and dear contemporaries. They are young, and Christmas is for them.

In the hearts of these faithful is a deep faith in their Father. They may know themselves wise with all the wisdom of grave science and world literature; in the light of God's omniscience they know they are His little children, playing with sand piles upon a tide-swept shore. Yet they are glad, for their Father will not forget His children, but with tender eyes will hover over their days, guard through their nights, and lead them home with strong and gracious arms. Happily they face all of life; happily they face Christmas. They have the ageless faith of childhood.

Wearily the pagan world, grown old in sin, staggers to its work and sags after its play. Even its Christmas is drear and meaningless and heavily streaked with sin; for though it may gesture toward its human children, it has forgotten the Divine Child. But to us who are His adorers as well as His adopted brothers and sisters, Christmas comes as the birthday we love best. To us it brings back all the thrilling joy of His childhood and our own.

In the glory of the Mass He is re-born.

In the warm shelter of our souls, He finds His eucharistic Bethlehem, not cold now and repelling, but, we hope, warm, hospitable, fragrant with grace.

In the midst of our children He rests, our unseen, but first-honoured, guest.

In church and convent chapel young-eyed priests and never-aging nuns bend tenderly over the Figure in the crib, and then raise joyful heads to the glad Reality within the crib of the tabernacle.

And bells peal forth, and hearts leap up, and children smile, hardly knowing why they smile, and old people yearn for the re-birth that stupidly we call death, and mothers are wearily glad for the anxieties and joys of the day, and fathers touch their children's heads with new reverence, and old wrongs are forgiven, and old songs are sung, and Christmas reigns and peace is everywhere:

Because of a Child who was born to us and a Son who was given to us.

Because we are children of the Father who is His.

Because in a cave we have found the spring of eternal life.

Because divine love has assumed its most attractive form and reached out to us the compelling arms of infancy.

Because we stand in the light that is the unfading smile of the Child of the Christmastide.

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