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Christmas in Legend and Story A Book for Boys and Girls

Elva S. Smith

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CHRISTMAS IN LEGEND AND STORY

Some say that ever 'gainst that season comes
Wherein our Saviour's birth, is celebrated,
The bird of dawning singeth all night long:
And then, they say, no spirit dares stir abroad;
The nights are wholesome; then no planets strike,
No fairy takes, nor witch hath power to charm,
So hallow'd and so gracious is the time.

SHAKESPEARE.

CHRISTMAS IN LEGEND AND STORY

A BOOK FOR BOYS AND GIRLS

COMPILED

BY

ELVA S. SMITH

CARNEGIE LIBRARY PITTSBURGH

AND

ALICE I. HAZELTINE

PUBLIC LIBRARY ST. LOUIS

ILLUSTRATED FROM FAMOUS PAINTINGS

CHRISTMAS IN LEGEND AND STORY

PREFACE

In our experience in library work with children we have learned that it is very difficult to find Christmas stories and legends which have literary merit, are reverent in spirit, and are also suitable for children. This collection has been made in an endeavor to meet this need, and thus to be of service to parents, teachers, and librarians.

Most of the stories and poems in this book are of the legendary type. They have been chosen from a wide variety of sources and represent the work of many writers. There are other stories also, which, although not strictly traditional, have the same reverent spirit and illustrate traditional beliefs and customs. These have been included for their literary value and their interest for young people.

In the arrangement of the selections we have followed the natural order of the events in preference to grouping the stories for boys and girls of different ages.

Although no attempt has been made to adapt the legends for story-telling, most of them may be used for that purpose. Many of the selections are also well suited for reading aloud.

Above all it is hoped that this book may bring real joy to the boys and girls for whom it has been compiled.

ELVA S. SMITH,
CATALOGUER OF CHILDREN'S BOOKS,
CARNEGIE LIBRARY OF PITTSBURGH.

ALICE I. HAZELTINE,
SUPERVISOR OF CHILDREN'S WORK,
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The story of St. Christopher is taken chiefly from the "Golden Legend," but a few suggestions for its adaptation were obtained from a version by Olive Logan.

CONTENTS

"THE GRACIOUS TIME"

THE ADORATION OF THE SHEPHERDS ST. LUKE, II, 1-16

THE CHILD BORN AT BETHLEHEM HORACE ELISHA SCUD-
DER

AS JOSEPH WAS A-WALKING OLD ENGLISH CAROL

THE PEACEFUL NIGHT JOHN MILTON

THE CHRISTMAS SILENCE MARGARET DELAND

NEIGHBORS OF THE CHRIST NIGHT NORA ARCHIBALD
SMITH

CHRISTMAS CAROL FROM THE NEAPOLITAN

A CHRISTMAS HYMN RICHARD WATSON GILDER

THE SONG OF A SHEPHERD – BOY AT BETHLEHEM JOSE-
PHINE PRESTON PEABODY

THE FIRST CHRISTMAS ROSES ADAPTED FROM AN OLD LEG-
END

THE LITTLE GRAY LAMB ARCHIBALD BERESFORD SULLIVAN

THE HOLY NIGHT ELIZABETH BARRETT BROWNING

THE STAR BEARER EDMUND CLARENCE STEDMAN

THE VISIT OF THE WISE MEN ST. MATTHEW, II, 1-12

THE THREE KINGS HENRY WADSWORTH LONGFELLOW

THE THREE HOLY KINGS ADAPTED FROM THE GOLDEN
LEGEND, AND OTHER SOURCES

THE THREE KINGS OF COLOGNE EUGENE FIELD

BABOUSCKA ADELAIDE SKEEL

THE FLIGHT INTO EGYPT SELMA LAGERLÖF

THE HAUGHTY ASPEN NORA ARCHIBALD SMITH

THE LITTLE MUD-SPARROWS ELIZABETH STUART PHELPS

THE CHILDREN OF WIND AND THE CLAN OF PEACE FIONA
MACLEOD

THE CHILD JESUS IN THE GARDEN AUTHOR UNKNOWN

THE MYSTIC THORN ADAPTED FROM TRADITIONAL
SOURCES

THE BLOOMING OF THE WHITE THORN EDITH MATILDA
THOMAS

LEGEND OF ST. CHRISTOPHER ADAPTED FROM THE GOLDEN
LEGEND

ST. CHRISTOPHER OF THE GAEL FIONA MACLEOD

THE CROSS OF THE DUMB FIONA MACLEOD

THE CHRISTMAS SONG OF CAEDMON H.E.G. PARDEE

GOOD KING WENCESLAS JOHN MASON NEALE

THE CHRISTMAS AT GRECCIO: A STORY OF ST. FRANCIS SO-
PHIE JEWETT

THE SIN OF THE PRINCE BISHOP WILLIAM CANTON

EARL SIGURD'S CHRISTMAS EVE HJALMAR HJORTH
BOYESEN

A CHRISTMAS LEGEND FLORENCE SCANNELL

THE LEGEND OF THE CHRISTMAS ROSE SELMA LAGERLÖF

FÉLIX EVALEEN STEIN

THE SABOT OF LITTLE WOLFF FRANÇOIS COPPÉE

THE LITTLE FRIEND ABBIE FARWELL BROWN

WHERE LOVE IS, THERE GOD IS ALSO COUNT LYOF N. TOL-
STOÏ

CHRISTMAS IN LEGEND AND STORY

"THE GRACIOUS TIME"

According to tradition, on the Holy Night there fell upon Bethlehem of Judea a strange and unnatural calm; the voices of the birds were hushed, water ceased to flow and the wind was stilled. But when the child Jesus was born all nature burst into new life; trees put forth green leaves, grass sprang up and bright flowers bloomed. To animals was granted the power of human speech and the ox and the ass knelt in their stalls in adoration of the infant Saviour. Then it was that the shepherds abiding in the field with their flocks heard the angels praising God, and kings of the Orient watching in their "far country" saw ablaze in the heavens the long-expected sign. Even in distant Rome there sprang up a well or fountain which "ran largely" and the ancient prophetess, Sibyl, looking eastward from the Capitoline hill heard the angel song and saw in vision all the wonders of that night.

There are many such traditional tales of the nativity, of the "star-led wizards" and of the marvels wrought by the boy Christ. They tell of the bees singing their sweet hymn of praise to the Lord, of the palm-tree bending down its branches that the weary travellers fleeing from the wrath of Herod might be refreshed by its fruit, of the juniper which opened to conceal them and of the sweet-smelling balsam which grew wherever the drops of moisture fell from the brow of the Boy "as He ran about or toiled in His loving service for His Mother." Quaint fancies some of these, perhaps, and not all of them worth preserving; but oftentimes beautiful, and with a germ of truth.

From the centuries between then and now, come stories of holy men, of bishops and peasant-saints, and of brave men who preached the White Christ to the vikings of the north or on Iona's

isle. As in popular belief, with each returning eve of the nativity the miracles of the first Christmas happen again, so in these tales the thorn-tree blossoms anew and wonderful roses bloom in the bleak forest.

Other stories tell how on each Christmas eve the little Christ-child comes again to earth and wanders through village or town, while lighted candles are placed in the windows to guide Him on His way.

These various legends and traditional tales, which sprang up among the people like flowers by the wayside and became a part of the life of the Middle Ages, are still of interest to us of to-day and have a distinct charm of their own. And when the childlike faith and beauty of thought of the finest of these have found expression in literary form they seem particularly suited for our reading at "the gracious time."

THE ADORATION OF THE SHEPHERDS

ST. LUKE, II, 1-16

And it came to pass in those days, that there went out a decree from Caesar Augustus, that all the world should be taxed.

And this taxing was first made when Cyrenius was governor of Syria.

And all went to be taxed, every one into his own city.

And Joseph also went up from Galilee, out of the city of Nazareth, into Judaea, unto the city of David, which is called Bethlehem; because he was of the house and lineage of David:

To be taxed with Mary his espoused wife, being great with child.

And so it was, that, while they were there, the days were accomplished that she should be delivered.

And she brought forth her firstborn son, and wrapped him in swaddling clothes, and laid him in a manger; because there was no room for them in the inn.

And there were in the same country shepherds abiding in the field, keeping watch over their flock by night.

And, lo, the angel of the Lord came upon them, and the glory of the Lord shone round about them: and they were sore afraid.

And the angel said unto 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 in the city of David a Saviour, which is Christ the Lord.

And this shall be a sign unto you; Ye shall find the babe wrapped in swaddling clothes, lying in a manger.

And suddenly there was with the angel a multitude of the heavenly host praising God, and saying,

Glory to God in the highest, and on earth peace, good will toward men.

And it came to pass, as the angels were gone away from them into heaven, the shepherds said one to another, Let us now go even unto Bethlehem, and see this thing which is come to pass, which the Lord hath made known unto us.

And they came with haste, and found Mary, and Joseph, and the babe lying in a manger.

THE CHILD BORN AT BETHLEHEM

HORACE ELISHA SCUDDER

About six miles to the south of Jerusalem is the village of Bethlehem, lying along the slope and on the top of a gray hill, from the steep eastern end of which one looks over a broad plain, toward a

range of high hills beyond. At any time, as one drew near the place, coming from Jerusalem, he would pass by rounded hills, and now and then cross little ravines with brooks, sometimes full of water, sometimes only beds of stone; and, if it were spring-time, he would see the hills and valleys covered with their grass, and sprinkled abundantly with a great variety of wild flowers, daisies, poppies, the Star of Bethlehem, tulips and anemones—a broad sheet of color, of scarlet, white and green. Perhaps, very long ago, there were trees also where now there are none; and on those hills, gray with the stone that peeped out through the grass, stood the mighty cedars of Lebanon, stretching out their sweeping branches, and oaks, sturdy and rich with dark foliage, green the year round. At any rate, then, as now, we may believe that there were vineyards upon the sunny slopes, and we know that the wind blew over corn-fields covering the plains that lay between the ranges of hills.

It is of the time long since that we are thinking, when there were no massive buildings on Bethlehem hill, such as are to be seen in the town as it now appears. Instead, there were low houses, many of mud and sunburnt brick, some so poor, doubtless, that the cattle were stalled, if not in the same room with the people of the house, yet so near that they could be heard through the partition, stamping, and crunching their food. There was an inn there, also; but we must not think of it as like our modern public-houses, with a landlord and servants, where one could have what he needed by paying for it. Rather, it was a collection of buildings for the convenience and accommodation of travelers, who brought with them whatever they required of food, and the means of preparing it, finding there only shelter and the roughest conveniences. The larger inns of this sort were built in the form of a great courtyard surrounded by arcades, in which people stayed, and kept their goods, if they were merchants.

The inn at Bethlehem was not probably one of these great caravanserais,—as they are called now in the East, because caravans stop at them; and it is even possible that the stables about the inn were simply caves scooped out of the soft chalk rock, for the country there has an abundance of these caves used for this very purpose.